

STATEMENT

Regarding the competition for "Associate Professor" in the Department of Cultural Studies of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" under section 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (Theory and History of Culture. Anthropology of Contemporary Cultural Practices. Studies of Material Culture), announced in the Official Gazette, no. 67 of 04.08.2023.

Sole participant: Chief Assistant Professor Dr. Velislava Yurieva Petrova, Department of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

By: Prof. Dr. Boyan Ivaylov Znepolski, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

In my statement, I will focus primarily on the habilitation work published in 2023 and presented for the competition, namely Velislava Petrova's monograph "Waste as a Resource and Imagination. Anthropological Perspectives".

The monograph "Waste as a Resource and Imagination. Anthropological Perspectives" undoubtedly represents an innovative study - the first comprehensive study devoted to the topic of waste in the Bulgarian social sciences. The merit of the study is not only its non-standard subject - the waste - which only at first glance may seem secondary, but also the author's ability to turn this subject into a focus through which key problems of modern Bulgarian society can be posed and examined. Velislava Petrova manages to weave an analytical thread, which in the course of the narrative successfully combines different levels and issues: the levels of the local and the global; cultural issues and socio-economic issues; administrative and technological practices and imagined social meanings. Although the focus of the monograph is the waste problem affecting today's Bulgarian society, in particular the capital Sofia, this problem is solidly theoretically contextualized, by referring to the most serious

academic research on the subject internationally. An additional but important merit of the work is its very good structure, the logical and well-grounded interrelationship of its different parts and chapters, as well as the effort at each research stage to draw clear conclusions and to summarize what has already been said, albeit with risk from some repetitions.

The connection between the theme of waste and the order of moral categories can be found even in the world of fairy tales - the folk tale "Plums for Garbage" or Oscar Wilde's tale "The Happy Prince", for example. Velislava Petrova's methodological ambition, however, is to use this topic, containing moral implications, introducing social distinctions and hierarchies, to problematize the conceptual oppositions culture-nature and culture-economy, showing the interdependence of the concepts. As an approach, this more specifically means historicizing the category "waste", placing it in a certain cultural context, deciphering the economic interests intertwined in it, reading the imagined social meanings with which it is associated, linking it to the general problematic of the protection of environment (the "anthropocene" or "socialocene" issue). Velislava Petrova's research approach is clearly defined: the global ethnography in the spirit of Michael Buravoy, as well as the general theoretical and analytical framework proposed by Juzha Gille (p. 21).

Velislava Petrova sets the necessary general framework of her empirical research on Sofia, in which she defines the main institutional and normative prerequisites, as well as the major social changes (the decline of the welfare state, the neoliberal turn, the emergence of the consumer society, etc.), which mark the evolution in general of our attitude to nature and to waste in particular. In this regard, in the part "Toward the cultural history of waste", she introduces the key concepts "anthropocene", "socialocene" and "capitalocene", which define the meaning of these changes in recent decades. In this part we also find two important methodological conclusions. First, the study of the topic of waste requires a redefinition of the local-global opposition and a general redefinition of the classical notion of anthropology as closely tied to locality (p. 44). Second, insofar as anthropology is no longer limited to an understanding of the strictly local, but has the ambition to discover and study the global in its local manifestations, it can have greater research ambitions. In this way, the study of

waste turns out to be a prism through which we can examine and reconstruct the contemporary state of Bulgarian society: "In fact, the topic of waste perfectly represents the contemporary social, political and economic situation in the country [...] Therefore, understanding the topic of waste is also a path to the understanding of modern Bulgaria: through the subject, all contemporary processes become visible, the economic transformation, the formation of the elites, the practices of corruption." (p. 45)

To make the transition from global socio-economic transformations in recent decades implying a changed attitude towards nature to the specific issue of waste in the city of Sofia, Velislava Petrova inevitably introduces the topic of transition from centralized planned economy to market economy. This part is based mostly on the analyzes of Juzha Gille for Hungary due to the lack of research material for Bulgaria and focuses on several main theses: transfer of waste "management" from the state to the private sector; transforming responsibility for waste from collective to individual responsibility; a change of perspective towards waste itself: from a resource and wealth it becomes something superfluous that we must get rid of. This part, probably due to a lack of specific research material, seems schematic and ascetic from the point of view of the analysis of the researched topic.

The two parts - "Waste as materiality and imagination" and "Waste as an economic category" - are directly related to the specific empirical research on the topic of waste, which Velislava Petrova is conducting in the city of Sofia. These parts testify to a thorough knowledge of the history of Sofia's waste problem, of the main actors in this sphere (municipal administration, NGOs, private companies, experts), and also of the "battles for Sofia's garbage", as the author calls them. Velislava Petrova demonstrates an extremely good knowledge of the various technologies for waste treatment, as well as of the debates related to these technologies at the national and international level. The constant problematization of the "garbage imagination" highlights waste not only as an economic category and a stake for political battles, but also as a powerful imaginary meaning that structures and positions the spheres of the economic and the political in a specific cultural-historical context. It is the problematization of the imagined meaning of garbage in our context that allows

us to discover and maintain a critical distance from such prejudices as the adamant denial of incineration as a technology or considering the import of waste as a shameful declassification of our country and placing it among the outsiders in the EU.

In the last two parts of her book, Velislava Petrova manages to highlight the topic of waste as a constellation linking different spheres and issues: administrative management, moral commitment, economic interests, imagined cultural meanings. Researching and understanding this topic requires an interdisciplinary approach capable of highlighting and relating its various dimensions to each other. The common horizon uniting these perspectives is the public interest, which implies political will and political commitment. Velislava Petrova's conclusions in this regard are reasonably pessimistic: weak professional capacity of the administration, lack of managerial courage and will; poorly informed citizens, with a low degree of mobilization; aggressive private interests; cultural context biases that often obscure the big picture. In such a situation, the political, and therefore the public interest, recedes into the background: "In general, environmental policies in Bulgaria are completely dysfunctional: they are formed by the financial interests of the companies involved, pro forma policies and the lack of capacity and desire. " (p. 150)

Remarks and questions

In the final part of her monograph, Velislava Petrova introduces, in a completely justified manner, but rather negatively, the concept of "public interest", opposing it to the policies for environmental protection, respectively the policies of the Metropolitan Municipality in relation to waste, which according to the author are clearly dominated (and deformed) by vested interests. I would like to ask Velislava Petrova how we could positively define (the formation of) the public interest in view of the "management" of waste at the municipal level?

Academic contributions of Velislava Petrova

The monograph of Velislava Petrova, submitted for the competition for Associate Professor, represents an original study of a topic that has been almost

untouched by the Bulgarian social sciences until now. The study is very well structured, demonstrates excellent knowledge of the research on the subject on international academic level, as well as a very good knowledge of the Bulgarian "terrain". The conclusions reached by the author are well-founded and sound convincing. The author manages to go beyond the specific research topic to reach the more general problems of contemporary Bulgarian society. To these contributions of the monograph, I would also add one methodological contribution, namely the laudable reflexivity of Velislava Petrova, who, defining the subject and methods of her research, also asks the question of what type of anthropology would respond to her research goals. All these contributions are proof of the indisputable research qualities of Velislava Petrova. To this we must add that she fully meets the minimum national scientometric requirements for holding the position of "Associate Professor".

Conclusion

The high scientific qualities and contributions of the monograph "Waste as a resource and imagination. Anthropological perspectives", as well as the very good personal impressions I have of the candidate, give me reason without any hesitation to recommend to the respected members of the scientific jury to vote unanimously YES for the election of Ch. Assistant Dr. Velislava Yurieva Petrova to the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the Department of Cultural Studies of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - professional direction 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (Theory and History of Culture. Anthropology of Contemporary Cultural Practices. Studies of Material Culture).

Sofia, 16.12.2023

Prof. Dr. Boyan Znepolski