

## **Review**

*by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Todor Hristov, The Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"  
on a competition for the academic position of associate professor at the Sofia University  
State Gazette no. 54, 29.06.2021  
field 1.3. Pedagogy (Methodical problems of the education in literature. Information and  
communication technologies in education and work in digital environment)*

### **1. General description of the academic activity and publications of the candidate**

Natalia Hristova is the only participant in the for the position of associate professor at the Sofia University, State Gazette no. 54, 29.06.2021, field 1.3. Pedagogy (Methodical problems of the education in literature. Information and communication technologies in education and work in digital environment). She has submitted 16 publications including 1 book and 15 articles. The publications and her academic and teaching activities meet the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the relevant legal norms and the statute of the Sofia University.

### **2. Evaluation of the academic achievements of the candidate**

The study presented by Natalia Hristova in the current competition is an original research on a problem of extreme importance characterized by a grand scale, erudition and critical reflexivity. For the purposes of this review, I will book down the main argument to this: the education in humanities is transformed under the pressure of social and economic forces, and this brings about a risk of deformation of humanity. I find particularly important the details of the argument because they take into account the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the effects of transformation and deformation: the development of medicine into a statistically-oriented regime of intervention (82); the emergence of optimization and intensification of life into principles of late-modern rationality (77); the constitution of economic efficiency as an imperative; the process of refocusing of education on flexible, measurable competences (116); the transformation of schools into redistribution hubs channeling the students into divers social trajectories (8); the proletarianization of the teachers (9); the decline of deep attention (124); the erosion of compassion (15), creative imagination (24) and critical reflection (15); the downfall of democracy (14, 20).

The argument developed by Natalia Hristova is based on a particular notion of humanity derived from the works of Bernard Stiegler, Martha Nussbaum, Tsvetan Todorov, Richard Rorty. In general, the notion is associated with a discursive strategy that can be tentatively defined as posthumanism. Although it is based on the heritage of classical humanism, that strategy in itself is unorthodox, non-classical because it is defined by its opposition to transhumanism conceived as a symptom of more fundamental social transformations. As an effect, posthumanism does not frame humanity as essence, as a stable anthropological, cultural or social foundation invulnerable to the tides of historical change. Humanity in the perspective developed by Natalia Hristova is what we are at the risk of wasting, it is undermined, eroded, fractured, on the verge of collapse and if it is nevertheless stable as a concept, this is because it refers to a particular, non-linear time. It does not flow from the future to the past, it is rather a past threatening to detach itself from the course of time and to sink into the unfathomable depths of 'never more'. I believe that this particular time condensed in Natalia Hristova's concept of humanity can be articulated as a formula, 'before it is too late', characteristic of diverging, often contradictory politics varying from the attempts to check global warming to defending the nation. If we take this into account, then the concept of humanity in the study is quite contemporary, it is shaped by late modernity and this is one of the most important contributions of Natalia Hristova's research.

However, the object is not just to identify a crucial moment for humanity. Natalia Hristova has developed a critical perspective on the erosion of the concept of humanity shaped by three superimposed optics: firstly, a normative perspective on humanity characterized by a particular negativity that can be summarized along the following lines: we are no longer inherently human; we can dissipate our human nature, we can fritter away ourselves, we can become inhuman, robots, cyborgs, monsters; thus humanity is what we have to frugally conserve; secondly, a detailed focus on the effects of the erosion of human nature (the analysis of ADHD is of particular importance here because it demonstrates how the interplay of economic interests, medical care, therapeutic interventions and communication technologies can transform the functions of schooling and affect the social trajectories of the students; pp. 104 ff.); thirdly, a discursive strategy that consists in projecting such effects on the horizon of a possible future drawn from a vast transhumanist literature (as a result, the effects are magnified to a scale that makes visible their destructive potential despite their alleged trivialities, see the analysis of the advent of browsing at the expense of reading, 121).

### 3. Questions and comments

The study is focused on a problem of such complexity that it involves reconceptualizing the education in human sciences in the conceptual frameworks of cybernetics, behaviorist, cognitive sciences, brain science, medicine and biopolitics. Since such frameworks are much wider than education, notwithstanding the vital importance of the latter, they invite questions that are somewhat marginal to the study, yet it is precisely the detailed and rich analysis of the posthumanist situation that makes such questions possible.

Firstly, what does control mean precisely (see for example p. 22-3)? Natalia Hristova argues that the erosion of humanity intensifies control, yet it is irreducible neither to oppression nor to surveillance because oppression implies infringement on individual rights, surveillance - a technological gaze able to follow any movement of the subject. The control described by Natalia Hristova, however, is biopolitical, it does not follow the movements of the subject but rather guides them, and instead of curtailing their rights it stratifies the field of possible choices by means of associating some of them with a higher risk or cost (even if the additional cost consists in the investment of more time or efforts). If that type of control is the future, then the future will be closer to the Chinese social credit system or the management of the current pandemic. Furthermore, a regime of biopolitical control does not infringe on individual rights because it operates at the level of population, and it constitutes the subjects as dividuals (in the sense of Gilles Deleuze) rather than as individuals. In consequence, as we still do not have recognized dividual rights, biopolitical control is invulnerable to criticisms articulated as parrhesiastic acts or based on civil or personal rights.

Secondly, what is the discursive function of transhumanism? It is based on projections of technological knowledge into the future that free technology from the limitations of its actual state. In effect, transhumanism is essentially knowledge about the limitless possibilities of the future. Then should we conceive of transhumanism as a genre of science fiction denying its fictionality? Transhumanism is certainly a project, yet what if it is a utopic or dystopic project? Transhumanists are probably supported by multinational hi-tech companies, yet cannot we explain that support by the fact that communication, media and medical technologies brought about an "economy of hope" which can derive profit in the form of fictitious capital from the narratives about the future?

Third question, how are we to interpret the collusion between transhumanism and hi-tech companies? What is the function of transhumanists in this collusion? Should we frame them as visionaries guiding the future development of the hi-tech business, or they are unofficial representatives who declare in public the secret intentions that the hi-tech companies would not openly confess? Or are the transhumanists merely hi-tech jesters or fools in whose sound and fury one could occasionally glimpse the spark of wisdom? And what to make of the public strategies of the transhumanist movement described by Natalia Hristova? Are they simply PR, or just marketing, or a devious political strategy and, in the last case, is transhumanism a sort of conspiracy against humanity? Or the tacit alliance between hi-tech and transhumanism is an extension of the collusion between state and capital examined in detail by Antonio Gramsci?

Fourth question, what is the nature of the link between transhumanism and cybernetics? Transhumanists unquestionably believe to be its heirs but cybernetics has far more complex offspring family tree that includes family therapy and the late-socialist planned economy among others. Then should not we treat the claim for its heritage raised by transhumanists as questionable, at the very least. Actually, I think that an important contribution of Natalia Hristova's analysis of the links between cybernetics and transhumanism consists in the fact that it brings to the fore the utopian impulses that shaped cybernetics from its dawn.

Fifth, what is the basis of the association between biopolitics and the human optimization. As Natalia Hristova comments, biopolitics is targeted at populations, at humanity as a kind rather than on individuals while transhumanists dream of optimized individual bodies. At the same time, however, transhumanism is based on the imperative to intensify life characteristic of any modern biopower, and it is motivated by the hope that individual optimizations would eventually accumulate in transformations at the level of the human kind. Then does that mean that transhumanism is a sort of individualized biopolitics? Or the advent of transhumanism is rather a symptom of profound changes in late-modern biopolitics?

Last comment, I believe that any critique of the erosion of humanity is limited if it fails to question the imperative of economic performativity, and the excellent analysis of the emergence of ADHD as a schooling problem makes this compellingly clear. In order to do that, one has to challenge the hunger for economic growth which in turn involves a critique of the function of credit in late capitalism since, beyond primitive accumulation of capital,

any capitalist enterprise is fueled by credit and since any creditor demands an interest, growth is an inescapable consequence of credit. Of course, a critique of late capitalism of such a grand scale would be inappropriate for Natalia Hristova's study. Yet I believe that the study could benefit from other analyses of neoliberalism or late capitalism, say those developed by David Harvey or Frederic Jameson.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to state my opinion that Natalia Hristova excels as a researcher and professor in her field, and that she meets all the relevant criteria for habilitation. Therefore I recommend to the jury to afford her the academic position of associate professor.

Assoc. Prof. Todor Hristov

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Sofia