

OPINION

By Kolyo Videv Koev, Prof., DSc, Professional field 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences

Regarding: Competition for Professor in Professional field 2.1 Philology (Theory and History of Literature - Theory of Literature) at the Department of Theory and History of Literature, Sofia University

The competition was announced for the needs of the Department of Theory of Literature in SG No. 87 of 19 October 2021. I am appointed at the scientific jury of the competition according to the Order № RD - 38 - 10 of 05. 01. 2022 of the Rector of Sofia University Prof. A. Gerdzhikov. The only candidate for this competition is Todor Hristov Dechev, currently Associate Professor at the Department of Theory and History of Literature, Sofia University.

For participation in the competition Assoc. Prof. Hristov has submitted 2 monographs, 11 articles and scientific reports, 4 chapters of collective monographs. More than a third (6) of the publications are in English, published by prestigious publishers (e.g., Routledge). Eight of them (including the two monographs) have been published in the last three years (in 2019 - 2, in 2020 - 3, in 2021 - 3). The documents submitted to the competition also indicate participation in four research or education projects in the last five years. Behind these brief statistics is an intense research output with results that far exceed the minimum requirements for a professorship.

If I were to present in general terms the problem area in which Todor Hristov's research has been focused over the years, I would point first of all to the uses of power in its various manifestations: from the "social legitimation of state power" (PhD thesis from 2005), through the "power effects of practices of the self" (e.g., "Unserious Religion: Jediism as a Mode of Responsibilisation", 2017), the treatment of truth beyond the knowledge-power complex (in the monograph *Impossible Knowledge: Conspiracy Theories, Power, and Truth*, 2019), late-capitalist "biopolitical apparatuses" (e.g., the 2021 article "Biopolitics and the Problem of Surplus Population"), to the exploration of the "polemology of everyday life" (in the 2021 monograph *The Sound and The Fury: Archeology of the Marital Quarrels*).

Such a general enumeration gives a poor idea of the actual nature of the candidate's research interests. In order to make the picture more distinct, the specific aspect on which he focuses in each of these fields must necessarily be added. I would label it as the *weak strength* of power practices, which mostly goes unrecognized by conventional scientific knowledge, but can have erosive consequences. For example, in the monograph *Impossible Knowledge: Conspiracy Theories, Power, and Truth* (2019), T. Hristov shows that debunking the "knowledge" of conspiracy theories as "social dysfunction" is fundamentally irrelevant and even counterproductive, insofar as it stabilizes them as entangled in the battle for truth (and thus essentially alternative) theories stifled by tyrannical power, and thus amplifies their popularity. Instead, the author suggests that we should be aware of the unintended power effects of conspiracy theories, which would mean focusing on their "dramatics and pragmatics," exposing them as "infelicitous parrhesiastic acts" and manifesting a practical rationality that requires understanding rather than debunking.

Similarly, the article "Practical Logic and the Everyday Rationality of Power" (*Heterodoxy* 1-2/20) raises the question of the ordinary exercise of power, in other words, of its treatment as a "radical phenomenon" in the sense of ethnomethodology. Considered in this way, it cannot be abstracted from the actors' knowledge of the situation (being an element of the situation's own reflexivity – to use another ethnomethodological term) and in this sense its rationality "has the character of a tactical art, of artfully saying or doing things in a setting that cannot be mastered, clarified or anticipated".

This research stylistics finds its clearest expression in the monograph presented as a habilitation thesis, *Sound and Fury: The Archaeology of Marital Scandal* (2021), and I will therefore focus on it in my Opinion. Before that, however, I will note that Assoc. Prof. Hristov has made the best of his employment in two different departments ("Theory and History of Literature" at the Sofia University "KI. Ohridski" and "Sociology and Human Sciences" at Paisii Hilendarski University), combining the possibilities of such fields of knowledge as critical theory, cultural studies, pragmatics, historical sociology.

Sound and Fury: An Archaeology of the Marital Scandal deals with speech in domestic quarrels. Or, to put it more concretely, the target of the study is "impossible statements," statements usually discarded as "meaningless voices, as noises." What are the discursive mechanisms that allow the impossible to be expressed, how do the participants in the scenes play with language to participate effectively in everyday struggles (however ephemeral they may seem) whose traces invisibly shape the history of social interactions and even predetermine their future? Or more generally: is – from such a perspective – everyday life a field of stability and normality, or is there a deep polemic, a character of a "political phenomenon" hiding under this appearance? These are the key questions shaping the nature of the research, which unfolds on an archive of material including scenes of scandal from literary works and recordings of conversations from therapy sessions. What the scenes under study have in common is the "privileging" of strange utterances, moving "on the edge of meaning". These are "singular statements" driven, however, by relations referring to "knowledge from the fields of medicine, psychiatry, public hygiene, sanitary science, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, ethnography" (p. 10). Guided by these interests, the study describes four modes of knowledge about domestic scandals, analyzed in four chapters, the titles of which are themselves an indication of the specificity of the respective mode: 'masculine domination' (Chapter Two), 'abnormality' (Chapter Three), 'dysfunctions' (Chapter Four), and 'depth' (Chapter Five). Although these regimes were born in different historical epochs, they are, in the end, superimposed on one another, intertwining in a particular geology of human interactions and in one way or another shaping their voices, even if they seem idiosyncratic and devoid of meaning.

Although the design of the study thus outlined, as well as the substantive analyses therein, are significant achievements of the author in their own right, for me the most significant contributions are contained in Chapters One and Six, as they predetermine the theoretical value of the analyses already mentioned. Here I will comment on only two of these contributions in terms of two aspects common to them.

The discursive apparatus that T. Hristov develops in Chapter One is a synthesis of Foucault's ideas with borrowings from Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Louis Hjelmslev. The idea is to reframe Foucault's notions of 'statement' and 'performative act' to make them 'applicable to

singular scenes'. Finally, in the "Summary", the author outlines three fields of relations (associative, correlative and supplementary) in which what is said in the domestic scandal fits, "in order to be individualized". This forms the framework of the analytical apparatus already mentioned. It is, however, far from being a ready-made, universal tool for describing "small, molecular relations that remain below the threshold of what the participants in a domestic scandal say" (p. 49). It is a tool tailored precisely to T. Christov's sensibility and, as can be seen from the concrete analyses, it is constantly animated by a rare ability ("to let realities work upon one") identified on another occasion by Weber. By this I emphasize the unique ability of Assoc. Prof. Christov's ability to prepare his mental body for an unintentional entry into the analytical field, which I perceived already as a reviewer of his doctoral thesis.

Similar stylistics is applied in Chapter Six to Stanley Cavell's notion of 'passionate speech', which is reframed in the monograph to relate it to Michel Foucault's unrealized project of 'discursive dramatics'. Thus, Cavell's and Austin's idea of the performative act is linked to some notions of Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari in order to achieve an idea of passionate speech that applies not only to the marital but also to "public scandals, political conflicts, protests without clear demands, the New Age cult milieu, conspiracy theories".

It is no coincidence that I stress the similarity of stylistics of elaborating the conceptual resources of the monograph in Chapters One and Six. I will also note a second important aspect of this similarity, which reminds me of a suggestion by the early Harvey Sacks: the author has to demonstrate in detail the materials from which he constructs his apparatus, so that the reader – if well disposed – can replicate his efforts and be convinced that the tool actually works. Which would mean that the reader, as long as he is competent, could combine the materials in question in his own way and use them for his own purposes. This is what Todor Hristov generously offers us in the reviewed monograph.

In the conclusion of my Opinion, I will make a recommendation (or rather a wish) for the future work of the author. I expect him to test his analytical skills on actual speech conflicts that have developed both in a marital context and in different institutional settings (e.g., the courtroom). The results, as he is no doubt aware, would be very different from those found in the fragments

of literary discourses or during therapy sessions (with the therapist's participation). This, of course, requires the accumulation of an archive of actual conversations, which unfortunately is still lacking in Bulgaria.

In conclusion:

The high evaluation of the quality of the scientific research activity and the undoubted theoretical value of the reviewed works, substantiated in the Opinion, gives me the grounds to confidently recommend to the members of the Scientific Jury that Associate Professor Todor Hristov Dechev be elected Professor in PF 2.1 Philology (Theory and History of Literature – Theory of Literature) in the Department of Theory of Literature at the Faculty of Slavonic Philology, Sofia University.

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Prof. K. Koev