

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

Mgr. Lucie Jarkovská, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

Sex education as an educational challenge in the 21st century

Reviewer

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Dr Lucie Jarkovská habilitation thesis, entitled *Sex education as an educational challenge in the 21st century*, is a fascinating example of new trends in educational or pedagogical studies that make good use of achievements of other disciplines such as gender studies, cultural anthropology, sociology, history and political sciences. Her thesis consists of previously published works and the commentary that skilfully links these works together. It is worth noting that presented articles appeared in books and journals by major global publishers, such as Routledge and Cambridge University Press or in case of Czech language publications in major local periodicals such as *Czech Sociological Review*.

The thesis as a whole successfully combines empirical and theoretical perspectives with practical suggestions for equality based sex education. On the empirical level, Dr Jarkovská draws on ethnography and auto-ethnography (for instance analysing her own experiences of discussing fairy tales with school children in her 2014 article on gender and children's literature) as well as discourses analysis. On the theoretical level, she builds on the contributions of both social constructivists, such as Michal Foucault and Jefferey Weeks, and new materialists, such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Dr Jarkovská skilfully combines these theories and sources in order to propose practical solutions.

This is especially visible in her 2019 contribution to *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence* co-authored with Sharon Lamp. The chapter, entitled "Not Innocent, but Vulnerable: An Approach to Childhood Innocence", uses the Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage in order to (1) conduct an insightful critique of the notion of children "innocence" that is being used globally in heated debates on sex education and (2) to propose not only theoretical, but also practical tools to overcome problems related to the notion of children "innocence". The Authors write: "We argue that when critiquing

the concept of childhood sexual innocence, scholars should be careful not to at the same time neglect the need for children's protection" (p. 43). Therefore, they suggest we should replace "innocence" with "vulnerability". Not only they discuss the issue from the conceptual perspective by linking it to "the idea of universal childhood development" and Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism" (p. 52), but also propose concrete solutions. Using a story of Sam, a third grader exposed to pornography, they show how to protect children without developing moral panics (p. 53-56).

Similarly in "Children's literature and the politics of gender", Dr Jarkovská focuses on fairy tales and shows how they could be used in equality oriented sex education. She stresses the meaning of young readers interpretations: "A fundamental question for the feminist reading of children's text is how the child relates to the text, how s/he invests herself/himself in it, how s/he interprets and uses it. A text does not work in a linear, unequivocal way; its interpretation always is related to the way of reading, the experiences of readers, and to their relating to the text and context in which they read" (p. 70). By this conceptualization of children's literature, Dr Jarkovská re-conceptualizes children as active agents, and shows the meaning of children's readings in the classroom and beyond.

Another important aspect of Dr Jarkovská's habilitation thesis is her focus on conflicts over sex education that highlight that sexuality and sex education are in fact political categories. In "The Demise of Tradition and Its Salvation through Sex: The Discursive Strategies of Opponents of Sex Education" (co-authored with Kateřina Lišková), she examines conservative framing of "good sex" and how this weakens public institutions. However, social and political importance of conflicts over sexuality and sex education is especially visible in her latest article, "The European Union as a Child Molester: Sex Education on pro-Russian Websites", in which she examines the message about sex that is promoted via pro-Russian websites in Czech and Slovak. She conducted scrupulous discourse analysis of 42 websites that were identified as conveying Kremlin message (p. 107). Given that the two countries have fundamentally different approaches to sexuality (Czechia being secular and liberal, while Slovakia – Catholic and more conservative), Dr Jarkovská's skilfully shows that "anti-gender" or anti-sex education rhetoric is not a locally forged ideology, but part of global political phenomenon aimed at diminishing liberal democracy and other "Western" values (p. 113). At the same time, the Author shows very clearly that the "catch up with the West" paradigm on which postsocialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe was built provided a fertile ground for Russian propaganda: "The idealised West lost its political and economic Messianic aura. Russian propaganda uses this deepening divide [East vs West] and describes the advanced Western democratic states as a criminal association promoting the decline and destruction of civilization" (p. 112).

A sad obligation of a reviewer is to point also to some weaker points of the reviewed thesis. In my opinion, it is slightly problematical to include into the habilitation thesis an article published in 2006, almost two decades ago. Dr Jarkovská published extensively on the topic of feminism and sex education, and I would argue that selecting something more recent on this theme (or at least supplementing the selection with a more recent article) would be a more suitable choice, as it would present more up to date picture on the issues in question and also more mature analysis (the Author did not even had her PhD while writing it). However, Dr Jarkovská successfully defends her choice in the commentary (p. 15-18) by placing it into more recent debates and discussing what happened next. But more details (that is more recent article) would present a fuller picture of Dr Jarkovská's achievements in the field.

To sum up, Dr Lucie Jarkovská habilitation thesis, *Sex education as an educational challenge in the 21st century*, is a carefully researched and well conceptualized work that convincingly shows the importance sex education in todays societies, gives some important hits on how to teach it, and suggests why it is so often "too hot to handle", to use Jonathan Zimmerman's phrase from his global history of sex education.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

1. To what extent analytical tools forged by the Author in her article "The European Union as a child molester: Sex education on pro-Russian websites" could be generalized and applied to the analysis of debates over sex education in other Central European counties, such as Poland?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled *Sex education as an educational challenge in the 21st century* by Mgr. Lucie Jarkovská, Ph.D. **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Pedagogy.

Date:
17 October 2022

Signature: 

