

Review

of the dissertation for acquiring the academic degree “Doctor of Sciences”. Area 3.1. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences. Professional Area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences. Specialty Sociology.

Author of the Dissertation: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Ruseva Zheleva

Topic of the dissertation: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

Reviewer: Professor Georgi Fotev Georgiev, DSc.

The dissertation work of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Zheleva is a remarkable event in our country's academic sociology. This highly positive assessment, in support of which I may offer several arguments, can also serve as the general conclusion of the present review.

The topic of sustainable development of society as an internally differentiated social system has, over time, been growing in significance and is of continuing importance. In the foreword to the dissertation, the author has explicitly grounded the importance and topical value of the theme, respectively, of the basic problem (which is in fact a set of problems) on which the study is focused.

Sustainable social development is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional process, and this characteristic is implicit in the concept of modern society as a social system internally differentiated into subsystems (the economy, politics, culture, etc.). The problems relevant to the

sustainable development of the separate subsystems are varied, but are the same as the issues of social development in the integral sense, i.e., the development of society as a social system.

Assoc. Prof. Rumiana Zheleva draws these distinctions clearly enough, as evidenced by her description of the study.

The sustainability of social development is a problem that emerges with the beginning of the modern age, as explicitly indicated at the very start by the author – the transition from traditional to modern society involves a turn from the cyclical structure of social and historical time to its vector temporal structure. The future becomes an unknown horizon of social development, about which we may judge in terms of probability, and which – using Husserl’s term – becomes an infinite task for reason. Things become dramatic and especially so in late modernity, of which we are the contemporaries. Rumiana Zheleva highlights the events that define the situation today, when the major issues of sustainable development are being posed. This is very aptly suggested in the title of the dissertation: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY. The problem of sustainability provokes uncertainty as a social-ontological attitude. Uncertainty is explained in the dissertation as stemming from the growing complexity of society. The author points attention to such transnational and global aspects of development as climate change, global temperatures, increasingly frequent extreme natural conditions, excessive consumption of resources, the loss of biodiversity, the lack of social and economic justice, which engender latent and evident social, economic, political and other tensions and conflicts. The key generalization is that uncertainty is the basic characteristic of the contemporary social order. **Risk management** is among the important mechanisms of sustainable development. Modern communication and information technologies have ambivalent functions (positive and negative) with regard to the sustainability of social development. According to R. Zheleva, “the risks are

often induced by modern technologies and science and are a result of human activity, not of natural forces. Modern society is increasingly dependent on complex technological systems, which create potential risks". Zheleva's theory of sustainable social development and its multiple aspects is connected with Ulrich Beck's concept of risk society. She has a rounded and in-depth knowledge of the ideas of this eminent German sociologist. I would recommend that she devote more attention to Niklas Luhmann, with whom she is acquainted, probably personally; but perhaps she has her own conceptual reasons to prefer Beck.

An important merit of the dissertation, meant to earn the highest academic degree in science, is the author's respect for the traditional form of presentation. I highly value this, in view of the practice, met with not infrequently, of negligence concealed under pretention to a seemingly organized form. Sociology is an empirical science, but empiricism that disregards sociological theory, as Pitirim Sorokin put it during his Harvard period, accumulates facts that it does not know what to do with. In this respect, I should highlight the consistency of this dissertation work.

The development of scientific knowledge, as well as the development of a mono-disciplinary science like sociology, is achieved, as Max Weber points out, through **internal differentiation and specialization**. Zheleva has good reason to view the complex issues of sustainable social development as a field of the differentiated sociological discipline of *sociology of sustainable development*. Science, whether empirical, normative, or other, is a theory of reality. The formation of a separate sociology of sustainable development as a relatively independent scientific and sociological perspective is not a kind of isolation of the field; it requires problematizing its connections with other sociological and non-sociological disciplinary perspectives. The dissertation problematizes the connections of sociology of sustainable

development with the theories of transformation that fall under the category of transition theories of the 1990s, of modernization theories and of other disciplinary fields.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Zheleva is a mature scholar who, in this dissertation and in previous works, has demonstrated her impressive sociological erudition, creative theoretical thinking and mastery of modern methodological tools in the field of sociology. I have known Rumiana Zheleva since her student years and have followed with interest her development as a researcher devoted to sociology, a scholar guided by the eminent examples of sociological research. She holds in deep respect the scientific legacy of Robert Merton (whom I was personally acquainted with and with whom I had the privilege to have an unforgettable conversation in his home in Manhattan). She is captivated by Merton's "middle range theory". In the light of this concept, Zheleva discovers reliable links between the theoretical model (theorizing) and concrete empirical observations in sociology.

Any science, and still more a positive science like sociology, is faced with the question as to what kind of social needs, and how, a given science responds to. Such is the ultimate purpose of any science, including sociology. The late modern age brings forth the phenomenon of final science. There is no space here for a detailed discussion, but it should be said that final science conducts studies and reaches discoveries that acquire immediate practical realization. To effectuate such immediate effect requires complex approaches and studies on urgent arising problems. Zheleva has in mind the need to find, for the sociology of sustainable development, "complementing and intersecting perspectives" along the line of economic science, organizational planning, management, ecology, etc. This is an adequate understanding of what I mean by final science. I would recommend that the widely used concept of complex approach be conceptually specified

in the future through clarification of the notion of an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective. This would concretize the complex approach.

The dissertation has a clearly formulated **basic thesis**, which is unfolded and concretized throughout the text, a large part of which refers to qualitative and quantitative social surveys carried out by the author. The middle-range theory of sustainable social development and the system of empirical surveys contribute to an integral combination of purposeful-rational and value-rational management of social change. The research conclusions promote the quality of organization management and activities (sociology of organizations). The dissertation sheds light on the impact of business companies on social change and sustainable social development. The functioning of organizations is determined by their environment and by how they adapt to changing conditions, including the normative and/or value requirements regarding sustainability. Depending on their resources, and whenever possible, organizations actively strive to enhance their sustainability and thus contribute to the sustainable development of a given social sphere and of society as a whole (i.e., the social system). The sustainability of an organization (including business organization), be it large or small, is determined by its structure and relevant culture, which might support sustainability or else may have exhausted their capacity, making change imperative. If a given organization or system is ridden with corruption, and when public intolerance of this problem has grown, the apparent sustainability may be shattered.

Sustainability is a purposeful and value-motivated social process involving the participation of concrete (individual) social actors participate, such as entrepreneurs, business leaders and experts in the field of sustainability. They are the social capital of business companies, of employers' and business organizations; they have various expert groups and other stakeholder communities, such

as expert and advocacy groups for environment protection and sustainable development. There are state and/or independent control organs and credit institutions, on which the reputation of businesses depends, international platforms and sustainability organizations, etc.

The author devotes attention to the non-financial measurement of enterprise sustainability. She uses terms that have gained currency in the common vocabulary of the specialized professional community; such terms are “sustainability reporting”, “corporate sustainability recording”. A good sociology succeeds in grasping the everyday languages in which the realities subject to description, comprehension and explanation are constructed.

One of the significant merits of this dissertation is the model it offers for practical application in the field of sociology of sustainability. It is not necessary here to linger in detail on the model, which is concisely presented in the dissertation abstract and enlarged upon in the dissertation. The author leans on the German Code for sustainable development and its taxonomy (a set of reporting indicators), on its application to small and medium enterprises, and on the Bulgarian code for sustainable development, modeled on the German one.

Methods and research techniques, such as document analysis (of legal and political texts), review and analysis of public databases related to the international systems of sustainability reporting (especially the German Sustainability Code and the Global Reporting Initiative); a quantitative study of 48 Bulgarian companies that report on sustainability (voluntarily or as obliged), qualitative (in-depth) interviews, as well as information gathered by means of several of the listed methods, have served to describe and examine three case studies; these have been carefully and

justifiably selected and successfully conducted, leading to productive results. Systematized and grounded conclusions have been drawn.

In terms of final science, the author has presented (conceptually) in the third chapter of the dissertation, on the one hand, a model of a sustainability code for Bulgarian companies and, on the other hand, the prospects for the implementation and institutionalization of that code. The author points out the possibility that there may be various sustainability codes in various contexts or organizations. This is understandable and tacitly implied in the context of the dissertation as a whole.

When an empirical social survey is based on a refined theoretical model, on the basis of which reliable hypotheses are formulated, subjected to verification and, respectively, falsified, the result is empirical data whose interpretation highlights scientific contributions. Such is the case of the work under discussion, presented as a claim to the academic degree “doctor of science”.

In the Self-Assessment of scientific contributions made in the dissertation, these are formulated with sufficient clarity. As a reviewer, I confirm that they are indeed present in the work. The contributions are numbered in the Reference. The first listed scientific contribution I would reformulate from “new theoretical perspectives are outlined” to “a new theoretical model is built” – a model naturally based on theoretical assumptions and achievements in the problem field. Such a formulation would not be unjustifiably pretentious.

Particularly valuable is the sixth scientific contribution on the list. The discovery of empirical regularities, as well as of new scientific facts, is an expected and truly valuable contribution in the framework of empirical sciences like sociology, and the sociology of sustainable development in particular.

This highly positive assessment of the contributions contained in the dissertation as a whole does not imply that the work has no weak points or is exempt from criticism. After all, we are talking about a public **defense** of the dissertation. My criticisms I would address in other contexts, in other kinds of reviews. In this case, I have reason enough to draw a definite, unambiguous conclusion, as required by the academic rules.

I have an important recommendation for Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Zheleva, and I insist that she respond to it at the defense. When, more than a decade ago, Michael Burawoy was president of the American Sociological Association, in his presidential address, he set the start to public sociology. It so happened that he published one of his subsequent articles on the topic in a collection dedicated to me. In *Sociology as a Rigorous Science*, there is a chapter on the topic. I would recommend that the dissertation be published immediately in book form. But in the spirit of public sociology, I insist that the author point out what steps she would take so that this work does not remain confined to the academic community but reaches a wide specialized public.

I must state my opinion as to a few more questions. All the requirements for a public defense have been strictly followed by the Institute and by the author of the dissertation. The dissertation and the abstract meet the formal requirements. Added to the text of the dissertation are seven useful, elegantly prepared supplements. An extensive bibliography has been attached, which includes all the cited literature and other valuable references on the dissertation topic. A bibliographical reference for 11 articles and studies on the topic, in Bulgarian, English and Macedonian, authored by Assoc. Prof. Zheleva has also been given as a supplement.

In view of the high scientific achievements and scientific contributions contained in the dissertation “Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty”, I will vote with full conviction YES for awarding the scientific degree DOCTOR OF SCIENCES to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Ruseva Zheleva. I would recommend that the honorable members of the Scientific Jury also vote without hesitation YES. This would be a well-deserved recognition for the fruitful efforts of our colleague, a gifted scholar and wonderful person, of whose scientific work all of us, as a community of professional sociologists, may be proud.

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Signature

(Prof. Georgi Fotev Georgiev, DSc)