

REVIEW

by Prof. DSc Rumiana Ivanova Stoilova (IPS – BAS)

of the dissertation by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Zheleva

Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty,

presented for acquiring the academic degree “Doctor of Sciences” in Professional Area

3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences

1. Information on the procedure for defense of the dissertation

The SC of IPS-BAS decided to elect a scientific jury on 18.07.2023, by Order № ПД-09-380/19.07.2023, issued by the Director of IPS-BAS, for appointing a Scientific Jury to assess the dissertation on the topic “Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty”, written by **Assoc. Prof. Rumiana Zheleva**, in connection with the procedure for awarding the academic degree “Doctor of Sciences”. All the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff Act have been observed.

2. Information on the fulfillment of the required academic indicators

Assoc. Prof. Rumiana Zheleva meets the national requirements for acquiring the academic degree “Doctor of Sciences” in accordance with Art. 2b of the DASRBA. The requirements for basic groups of indicators have been met. Submitted for assessment, in addition to the dissertation, are eleven publications produced after the habilitation of Assoc. Prof. Zheleva in 2012, four of which are in English. Ten citations have been indicated.

3. General impressions from the dissertation

The dissertation *Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty* is 315 pages long and consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, seven supplements and a list of literature, containing 250 titles (33 in Cyrillic characters, 182 in English and German). The author's Dissertation Abstract (51 pages) adequately presents the structure and basic theses of the dissertation.

4. Significance of the results, interpretations and conclusions

The dissertation theme, regarding sustainable development, is unquestionably of topical interest in our Late Modern age, in which we see the growth of environmental risks, of social challenges related to increasing inequalities in the global world, where markets and competition endanger the existence of social groups having minimal resources, qualification and education. The role of national states becomes more complex, and supra-national institutions face new challenges. The responsibility of business for preserving the natural environment, for ensuring social justice and solidarity (along with the pursuit of economic objectives) becomes ever more important. Attaining the goals of sustainable development, which combine the need to deal with economic, social and environmental challenges with social consensus regarding the future generations is an acute issue facing sociology. This is the problem on which the dissertation in question is focused.

In the *Introduction*, Rumiana Zheleva has concisely and clearly grounded the topical importance of the topic and defines the sociology of sustainable development as a “theoretical framework for conceptualizing, studying and managing the risks” arising in the course of social development. The author has outlined the goals, tasks and research approach of the dissertation

study. Sustainability in society depends on the action, and respectively is endangered by the inaction, of individuals and corporate actors pursuing only economic interests and goals. In the new context, in which the attainment of sustainable development becomes a supra-national goal, makes it necessary for business to take into account the concrete indicators measuring how it meets the requirements for social justice and the protection of the environment for future generations. Intergenerational justice, as measured by the Social Justice Index and monitored by the European Commission and the OECD, reflects this responsibility for environmental protection. By this indicator, Bulgaria holds one of the highest positions, unlike its performance on indicators for poverty prevention, equal access to education, access to the labor market, social integration and elimination of discrimination of vulnerable groups and access to health services. But this high position on one indicator must not console us, for, as the dissertation argues, the share of Bulgarian companies participating in voluntary reporting on sustainability is rather limited, and those who are involved in such reporting are primarily members of international chains for the creation of value.

The theoretical basis of *Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty*, as a middle-range theory, is defined in the tradition established by Robert Merton and contains a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods for empirical study of corporate sustainability, which, together with the proposed adapted model for voluntary reporting on sustainability, determine the structure of the dissertation.

In the *First Chapter of Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty*, the author conducts the analysis in the framework of three currents of theoretical sociology: the theory of social change, the theories of transformation of societies, and modernization theories. With regard to these three currents, the author presents convincingly some new aspects characterized

through the theory of sustainable development; here, referring to the system theory of Niklas Luhmann, R. Zheleva takes into account the importance of the environmental, social and economic aspects of the social system, which, in the framework of the concept of social sustainability, through social and corporate management involve dynamic balance. With regard to transformation theories, the most important requirements, in the light of sustainable development, are the requirements for social justice, equal opportunities and purposeful environmental action, which take into consideration the interests of future generations. As concerns modernization theories, the author stresses the contribution of the sociology of sustainable development through research on specific cultures and historical contexts, the assessment of achieved sustainability in terms of the course of social and economic development so far. To take into account the normative regulation on environmental protection and the gradual transformation of regulation is of key importance for sustainable development.

The conceptual tools of the dissertation are precisely defined and correspond to modern studies on sustainable development. The focus on the concept of social action, in keeping with Max Weber's methodological framework, produces good research results in the dissertation. Assoc. Prof. Zheleva stresses the concept of risk and endangerment proposed and used by Ulrich Beck. I would add one other concept - "indeterminacy" – used by Beck in his later works when he discusses the need for a new logic, a new style and methodology, in response to new forms of uncertainty¹.

In the *Second Chapter*, the author presents the empirical part of the dissertation. Continuing the theoretically argued connection between society – social action - sustainable development, R. Zheleva distinguishes several types of action for sustainability - participation, empowerment, cooperation,

¹ Ulrich Beck. *On the Road to a New Cosmopolitan Sociology*. Ulrich Beck's Program for the 21st Century (2019) University Publishers St. Kliment Ohridski, p. 212-229.

innovations, advocacy. These different types are defined as levels at which social change may be achieved or obstructed; personally, I would prefer that they be defined as different types of social action of individual and collective actors. Throughout the dissertation, these types of action are also analyzed as factors of sustainable corporate management.

The discussion on the social context is structured with great precision. The author takes into account the importance of the institutional framework and the legislative regulation; cultural values; features of the communities; regional and local specificities. This in-depth perspective on the social context in which individual and corporate actors function is a very suitable theoretical framework for research at national, regional and local level. As Roger Scruton points out in *Green Philosophy*, national government policies would not suffice if they did not rely on civil society and the local communities, with their “sustainability and ingenuity” (Scruton 2019)².

In *Chapter Three*, Assoc. Prof. Zheleva presents a conceptualized, adapted model for sustainability reporting on companies in Bulgaria, a model that follows the German Code. The choice of this particular code is based on its suitability for companies of varying scope and size. This is a valid consideration as regards overcoming the current tendency – identified in the dissertation research – for sustainability reports to be made mostly in the large companies. In order to expand the range of companies voluntarily reporting, small and medium companies should have an interest and be supported in this; the desired effect of illuminating the Bulgarian economy in its various segments (large, middle and small business) will thereby be achieved. The advantage of the proposed reporting model is its good structure and clear indicators, which are formulated based on the international normative framework for sustainability reporting in the EU. While the proposed indicators are not exhaustive, they set a clear orientation for assessing various sustainability factors: ecological, social, economic and governance-related. The concrete

² Scruton, R. (2019) *Green Philosophy. Conservatively about Ecology*. Siela (in Bulgarian)

steps to be taken for institutionalizing a Bulgarian code for sustainable development of companies are also indicated.

5. Assessment of the scientific contributions

The contributions contained in the dissertation are related to theoretical conceptualization and empirical research, and include the supplement regarding the assessment of the quality of change management and management of organizations for achieving sustainable development.

The contributions formulated by Assoc. Prof. Zheleva can be fully accepted. An indisputable contribution is the theoretical perspective on the sociology of sustainable development as a middle-range theory. The consistent analyses and formulated relations between theoretical concepts and empirical research in the dissertation, the adaptation of practical tools for sustainability reporting by firms, justify viewing the dissertation as an important achievement of academic sociology but as also significant for the practice of enterprise management at company and at national level.

Another contribution we may identify in the dissertation is the application of the methodological perspective of social action theory to the sociology of sustainable development. Specifically, important results are obtained by means of the analysis of the connection between society-company-action for sustainability. The subjects of analysis extend to action for sustainability reporting by actors at various levels and of various types. The clearly defined theoretical perspective applied by the author enables the discovery of empirical regularities, which contributes to the further differentiation of the sociology of sustainable development and its use for finding practical solutions for businesses, which are increasingly expected to adopt

sustainability reporting as an element of governance leading to greater trust in and transparency of corporations.

6. Questions and remarks

In *Chapter Two*, the author has formulated six hypotheses but has presented the results for only four. Hypotheses 5 and 6 are left without comments by the author. In preparing the text for publication in book form, which I firmly recommend, it would be well to enumerate the hypotheses in the way and sequence in which they have been formulated and tested. If some of the hypotheses are not sufficiently well-formulated, inasmuch as they include a large number of factors that variously influence the possibility for sustainability reporting, it would be well to present them in greater detail.

An advantage of the version of a Bulgarian Code proposed in the dissertation is that five steps are listed for its institutionalization and application: adopting legislation, creating and adopting standards and directions; training in and supporting greater public awareness; creating regulative organs and mechanisms for monitoring; expanding cooperation with stakeholders. I would ask the following questions: Is it necessary to include resource provisioning as a separate step and condition for voluntary reporting by companies in Bulgaria? Resource provisioning can probably be carried out in the form of tax concessions for companies that do sustainability reporting, but public funding for free services in carrying out the steps for reporting can also be envisaged. Resource provisioning is extremely important for small and medium companies as it would enlarge their capacity for voluntary sustainability reporting.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, I will express my definite impression that Assoc. Prof. Rumiana Zheleva is an experienced scholar and researcher, an active team-leader who is skilled in organizing projects and maintains high standards in her academic work. I strongly recommend that *Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty* be published as a book. It is with strong conviction that I recommend Assoc. Prof. Rumiana Zheleva be awarded the academic degree of “Doctor of Sciences” in professional area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences.

Sofia 28.09.2023

Prof. DSc Rumiana Stoilova

Signature: