

EVALUATION

by Prof. Emeritus DSc Veselin Petrov Petrov (IPS – BAS)

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

Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty,

presented to earn the academic degree “Doctor of Sciences” in Professional Area

3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences

The dissertation *Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty* by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Zheleva has 315 standard pages and consists of an introduction, three chapters, each containing several paragraphs, a conclusion, seven supplements and a bibliography containing 250 titles (33 in Cyrillic letters, 182 in Latin letters, and the rest, from online resources).

The author has argued the topical importance of the dissertation. The goals and the three tasks stemming from them are clearly formulated and define the structure of the chapters. The research approach has enabled the author to justify her basic thesis, that “the sociology of sustainable development is a middle-range theory and, as such, concretely contributes to conceptions in the field of social change and the management and activities of organizations (sociology of organizations)”.

The first chapter, entitled “Sustainable Development in Times of Uncertainty: Disciplinary Framework and Perspectives”, gives a very good idea about the disciplinary framework of sociology of sustainable development as a new sub-disciplines of sociology, one that is essentially a theory of social change. The author justifies the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of sustainable development. As to the philosophical aspect of this interdisciplinary approach, it is related to the critique of the outdated view that all societies follow a linear path of development, and to awareness of the need to assume a

dynamic basis (dynamic ontology) as a tacit philosophical methodological starting point, for the sociological study of the topic. The methodology adopted by Assoc. Prof. Zheleva is based on Weber's theory of social action; from this philosophical-methodological perspective, the dissertation focuses on sustainable development, but seen as a "dynamic" sustainability (similar to what is often referred to as "dynamic equilibrium"). The author tacitly assumes this modern philosophical view when she states that "sustainable development is a *framework* for achieving sustainability" (my italics – V. P.): this is a "framework" and not a frozen scheme; it allows the existence of variations, which express the dynamic development of any society, inasmuch as a society is the subject of philosophical study as well.

The second chapter, entitled "Empirical study of the non-financial reporting of business companies in the perspective of sociology of sustainability", is devoted to the analysis of an empirical survey on companies' non-financial reporting on sustainability. The empirical framework of the study is realized through several research techniques: analysis of documents; analysis of public data bases derived from international systems for confirming sustainability; a quantitative study on Bulgarian companies that do sustainability reporting; and in-depth interviews. Applying a philosophical perspective on the study in this chapter, I may say that it was carried out using the "top-down" methodological approach, where data and results from a lower research level (such as an empirical survey) are used to formulate and argue conclusions at a higher theoretical research level. This approach is quite justified in the practice of sociology, where the use of social surveys, interviews, etc., has led to fruitful results. This enables the author to draw general conclusions based on the information derived from the empirical survey, namely, that sustainability in business is based on principles such as: 1. The distribution of risks in various activities; 2. A consistent growth of the results and planned reproduction of the assets; 3. The existence of a financial reserve and liquidity to be used in critical situations; 4. Team-work of motivated and trained employees; 5. Change in

the political environment and the legislative model; 6. Economic incentives for developing a family business; 7. Sustainable business requires the simultaneous development of science and education; 8. Micro, small and medium enterprises play a specific role for change towards sustainable development.

This must not be confused with the “top-down” approach mentioned by Assoc. Prof. Zheleva as a normative requirement set by the EU; whereas the former case refers to a methodology in the author’s “bottom-up” research approach, in the latter case, the “top-down” approach is a recommendation for action, not a methodology. It is not accidental that this is the largest chapter of the dissertation: the presentation and analysis cover a large amount of data.

The third chapter, entitled “Designing a Sustainability Code in Bulgaria (An Attempt at Applying in Practice a Study in the Sociology of Sustainability)”, is devoted to the conceptualization of a sustainability code of Bulgarian companies. The German sustainability code is proposed as a model for the Bulgarian one. The author has demonstrated in detail why the German code may be useful for Bulgarian companies. Assoc. Prof. Zheleva points out four main sustainability factors: ecological sustainability, social sustainability, managerial sustainability and economic sustainability; the Bulgarian framework may also include a total of 20 indicators, grouped around the four main factors.

The conclusion, entitled “Open Entrepreneurship as a Factor of Success”, sums up the benefits and advantages of Bulgarian business companies in terms of their role as motors of sustainable development. The inference is that “various, but separate, practices of sustainable business behavior are possible in Bulgarian society”, and that these practices are “local (at the level of individual companies) rather than possible as a general logic of the behavior of economic actors”.

The dissertation includes seven supplements that give detailed information about the

empirical side of the study and the conducted interviews and surveys.

Assoc. Prof. Zheleva formulates 12 scientific contributions contained in her dissertation. These are clearly worded and quite authentic achievements of the author. It is not necessary here to repeat them, but I quite agree with her judgment. It is important to stress that the present dissertation represents a serious advance in the comparatively new research sphere – sociology of sustainable development; the author also offers ways of its concrete application and use in Bulgarian society.

The author's abstract (51 pages in length) clearly and precisely describes the dissertation and fully meets the requirements for such an abstract.

I have no critical remarks about the dissertation or the abstract.

The author has submitted twelve publications on the dissertation topic, four of which are in English (one of these is in press). She has also indicated 43 citations of her publications, references that demonstrate the visibility of her work in the specialized academic community. On the other hand, the literature referred to in the dissertation, as well as numerous citations there of normative documents on the subject, demonstrate Rumiana Zheleva's sound knowledge of the relevant literature. The author is evidently a leading specialist in our country in the problem field of the sociology of sustainable development. Additionally, Assoc. Prof. Zheleva has taken part in 22 research projects in our country and abroad, in six of which she has held positions of leadership. Here I should point out her role as main organizer of conferences of the Institute, held with the support of the Bulgarian section of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. She has presented more than 60 papers in the last ten years at international forums in Bulgaria and abroad.

With these data, R. Zheleva fully covers and even exceeds the minimal requirements for obtaining the academic degree of "Doctor of Sciences" in the field of social, economic and juridical sciences.

I have known Assoc. Prof. Zheleva for the last ten years. My personal impression is that she is an exceptionally serious and industrious researcher, a competent specialist in her field; I am convinced she will continue to develop and contribute to the advance of sociology in our country. She is a person one may rely on.

To conclude: Based on all said so far, I will vote with full conviction “yes” to awarding the scientific degree of Doctor of Sciences to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumiana Ruseva Zheleva in Professional Area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences. I also ask the other members of the jury to vote likewise.

Sofia

Prof. Emeritus DSc Veselin Petrov Petrov

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