

Review

by Prof. Todor Hristov, Department "Theory and history of literature", Faculty of Slavic Philology, Sofia University

of the publications presented for the competition for academic position "Professor" at Plovdiv University, higher-education area 2. Social, legal and economic studies, professional field 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (Historical sociology of inequality and discourse)

Assoc. Prof. Dr Stoyka Petrova Penkova is the only application submitted for the competition for the academic position "Professor" at the Department of applied and institutional sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History, Plovdiv University, announced in State Gazette no.96/11.11.2025.

1. General review of the submitted documents

In accordance with order No. RD-22-2569 of 16.12.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University, I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury in a competition for the academic position of "Professor" in higher-education area 2. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Historical sociology of inequality and discourse), for the needs of the Department of Applied and Institutional Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History. Only one candidate has submitted documents for participation in the competition: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoyka Petrova

Penkova from Plovdiv University. The documents and publications submitted by the candidate comply with the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of Plovdiv University. The candidate has submitted a total of 19 scientific publications, including 1 monograph, 4 studies and 14 articles, of which 11 articles and studies in Bulgarian and 8 in English; 2 articles in journals included in Web of Science and 1 in Scopus; 8 co-authored articles and studies.

2. Biographical information

Stoyka Penkova graduated with a master's degree in sociology from Plovdiv University. In 2010, she defended her doctoral dissertation on "Practical Logic and the Order of Discourse: Bourdieu and Foucault". In 2013, she received her habilitation with a study on "Inequality, Discourse, Enlightenment". Between 2014 and 2021, she was the head of the Department of Sociology and Human Sciences. In 2017–2021, Stoyka Penkova was a deputy dean, and from 2021 - the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Plovdiv University.

3. General evaluation of the applicant

3.1. Evaluation of the applicant's teaching experience

Stoyka Penkova has an extensive teaching experience in sociology at the Plovdiv University. She currently teaches 8 bachelor's, 7 master's, 2 doctoral courses, 1 foreign language course, 2 summer internships, and she is heading a laboratory in sociology. This impressive teaching activity is combined with numerous permanent and time-consuming

administrative commitments. Apart from this, Stoyka Penkova was the scientific supervisor of 12 bachelor's and 3 master's theses, but above all - of 3 successfully defended doctoral students. She has a central role in the formation of a group of researchers working in the field of social inequalities. The approach of the group is distinguished by reflexivity, theoretical soundness, amalgamation of micro, meso and macro-analyses, and an ambition to understand rather than to evaluate or predict social processes.

3.2. Evaluation of the applicant's research activity

Stoyka Penkova has submitted for the competition 1 book and 18 articles and studies, including 11 articles in Bulgarian and 8 in English; 2 articles in journals included in Web of Science and 1 in Scopus; 8 co-authored articles. 5 of the articles develop further the arguments in the book *Figures of Distinctiveness. Figures of Affectivity* (discussed in detail below). It should be noted, however, that a series of articles (2.1, 2.2, 2.8, 2.15, 2.16 from the list of publications) outline a new direction in Penkova's research. These articles focus on the nexus between environmental risk and social inequalities. Their main thesis is that attitudes towards environment depend on the habitus and the social positions of the actors, and if the latter are not taken into account, ecological norms are doomed to inefficiency. In this context, Stoyka Penkova introduces the productive concept of anthropobiotic community. The approach in the mentioned articles does not conflict with the studies on social inequalities collected in the monograph; instead, it offers an unusually productive perspective on the social costs of the green transition, recognized by the European Commission, but still considered primarily in a normative or macroeconomic sense. Another important thread in Penkova's research, which I find particularly fruitful, are her studies on the historical sociology of the Bulgarian village (publications 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.10).

A good indication of the intensity of Stoyka Penkova's research activity is the total volume of her publications: 4 monographs, 10 studies and 40 articles, including 14 in English and 17 in co-authorship. In addition, Stoyka Penkova is the editor of 4 collections and a member of the editorial board of another 5 edited collections. The number of papers she presented on conferences is also impressive: 47 in total, of which 11 at international forums. Stoyka Penkova is also the head of 3 research projects, including 1 funded by the Bulgarian National Research Fund; she is a member of the research teams of 11 projects, of which 2 international and 1 supported by the Bulgarian National Research Fund.

3.3. Achievements

Any social order is woven from differences. Stoyka Penkova demonstrates that they involve differentiation, and differentiation is a practical accomplishment in common-sense interactions (260). By way of an illustration, I will summarize in first-person one of the interactions examined by Penkova (pp. 211–22): She is rubbing against me. I am pulling away. The bodily act restores the distance between our bodies in the New York subway, but it is also a negation. Although it is unspoken, the silence sharpens the negativity. If I were to say ‘don’t touch me’, I would have appeared a rather touchy person, and my words would be but a gesture. However, since I am saying nothing, I can see myself as tolerant, or at least well-behaved, certainly not racist, even though she is black, and I am white (217). If a witness reads this scene as an embodied interaction, s/he would ignore the negativity. Additionally, the scene resists because interpretation presupposes depth, whereas the effects of social distancing are superficial or epidermal (218–9). Such effects emerge at the point of contact between bodies, things, and sayable but unspoken phrases. To take a full account of the scene, one needs concepts focused on the contact between words and things. This is the

function of the concepts of embodied performative, developed by Milena Tasheva (177, 219), and affect, derived from Sara Ahmed, who uses it to describe the forces that imprint meaning on interacting bodies (137). Therefore, social distancing is a bodily performative through which the electric voltage of a negative affect, disgust, flows.

How does distancing develop into social inequality? To return to the subway scene, I am looking at the black girl in anger not because I know her but because she is 'one of them'. Who are 'they'? Unlike 'us'. Deprived of what 'we' have (68). Furthermore, 'they' are not one (234, 279): everyone knows that there are real refugees (234), hardworking Roma (279), etc. Yet, since I don't know the girl, I can see that, as one of 'them', she is a potential problem. Imagine that, in order to account for this potentiality (237), I am thinking that 'they always, everywhere, ever' (262). Then, the risk become a negative identity filled with affects, anxiety, desire which spring as if from 'them', from the ghostly body of the affective other (209). The act of distancing already has the meaning of a rejection, a negation, a dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. Although the negation is tacit, it is recognizable because it is familiar from other scenes. But the fact that the negation has a history (134) does not mean that I am simply reproducing it. On the contrary, I am distancing myself from this particular body, here, now, each time the first time. Additionally, the dividing line between 'us' and 'them' does not simply unfold between my body and the other, it rather engulfs both of us (242). Since the girl is one of 'them', in my mind, I am not addressing her as 'you'; she is merely 'one', and in my soliloquy the opposition between 'I' and 'you', embedded in the very foundations of language, dissolves in the totality of 'we'.

The difference between 'us' and 'them' is not simply an incongruity. It is shaped by negative affective forces such as disgust and hatred (214). Stoyka Penkova describes that negative difference as distinction. One of the key achievements of the study is that it shows how distinction develops into inequality if it is invested with desire. Any excellence entails

exclusion, and, in Penkova's study, exclusion is not merely an opposition, in contrast, for example, to qualitative differences between income groups. Exclusion is the mechanism of any distinction considered as a social practice. If one summarizes the logic of exclusion on the basis of the discussion of hate on p. 211, then, any distinction entails a contact, an act of exclusion that transforms distance into rejection, and an affect fueling the rejection. If a distinction is recognized and reproduced in a series of situations, it ossifies into an order and settles into attitudes that overdetermine social and discursive practices (165–6).

Although luminosity is more complex than a silent scene in the subway, it involves a comparable discursive mechanism. To illustrate it, let me summarize another case discussed on pp. 60–2: An old woman, she is still toiling the fields of Razhevo Konare, a relatively large Thracian village. At a meeting of the Homeland Front organization, the woman says that her daughter asks her to retire. “But I will not,” responds she indirectly. Does the old woman have the right to say ‘no’ insofar as it is her daughter who will be taking care for her if she gets sick? No legal order defines who is right; the outcome of the argument depends on the response of the others at the meeting. If they respond affirmatively, she will have proven her point not in front of but rather by means of the meeting. Therefore, her ‘no’, addressed to the daughter, will be enunciated by a collective, by ‘we’, the members of the Homeland Front. However, the recognition of her right not to retire will entail an implicit exclusion of the other elderly villagers who, unlike her, are no longer capable of working in the fields. Does that mean that the Fatherland Front organization will intervene in the argument with her daughter like a totalitarian machine crushing any dissent? Hardly, because the statement of the old woman who does not want to retire marks out a point of consonance: “I should indeed take care of myself,” admits the woman, indicating that she does not want what the daughter does not want: to get sick and to become a burden on the family. Moreover, this point of contact, albeit in the negative dimension of their desires, serves as a support for the question

“why should not I be able to work”, colored by the tacit enjoyment of the virtual statement ‘I am able to’. No daughter would deny such an enjoyment to her mother. So since neither wants to deny to the other what the other wants, their desires converge, and the assembly can confirm with applause that everything is actually in order. Of course, the right not to retire cannot be solidified in a legal entitlement. Therefore, whether the non-pensionable pensioner is right will have to be decided aside for the first time any next time, implicitly reproducing the exclusion of the elderly people who can no longer work.

The concepts of affect and embodied performative are embedded in the conceptual framework of the Plovdiv sociological school. On one hand, this is an advantage because it makes possible the identification of stable molecules in the heterogeneous matter of social life (for example, the mentioned molecule of hatred on p. 211). On the other hand, however, the conceptual framework of the Plovdiv School focuses on structures rather than forces, and its application to affects brings about conceptual tensions. (1) If any speechless expression of affect is performative (see, for example, p. 241), then performatives are not speech acts, but simply acts; hence, the use of Austin's term essentially doubles the concept of act. This gives an advantage insofar as it transposes illocutionary logic to the level of behavior. But such an approach also risks diluting the concept. (2) Everyday-life scenes involve identifications irreducible to identity. For example, in the airport scene analyzed on pp. 189–91, the researcher experiences as his own the negative identity of the Roma passengers checked by the police, but her identity is actually “double,” and this doubling is made possible by an identification that cannot itself be thought of as an identity; and although the identification fades away, the researcher continues to experience “being-Roma” as otherness rather than as a stable identity. (3) The study convincingly shows that social distinction is a practical achievement in the ethnomethodological. But since it entails exclusion, is the exclusion also an achievement of the members? For example, is hatred also an achievement of the hated, or,

on the contrary, some agents are excluded from membership in the common-sense social order?

The points of conceptual tension are in fact productive. They stimulate the formation of an intermediate layer of conceptualizations, more specific than the concepts themselves, yet more general than the particular cases. (1) The study shows that performative acts in routine interactions are rarely individual (244). On the contrary, they are multiplicities, always metonymically displaced or metaphorically condensed (298). It is precisely because of these processes of displacement and adhesion that words stick to things or flow from bodies (229). Thus, the tension inherent in the concept of performative leads to the discovery of a particular semiotic regime which Stoika Penkova calls sticky signifiers (295), as well as to a productive discussion of the overdetermination of illocutionary acts by their perlocutionary effects (216).

(2) To compensate for the rigidity of identity as a concept, the study inscribed it in a field of territorialized distinctions; for example, the difference between good and bad cooperators (119), between the distinctive cooperative and the indistinct inertia of rural life, between the model village of Razhevo Konare and the neighboring village of Chernozem which always lags behind (see, for example, p. 33). In addition, the first part of Penkova's study describes a series of liminal thresholds that modify the social trajectories of the actors without fracturing their identity; for example, internal migration to cities (44). Additionally, temporal and spatial dividing lines can overlap, as the “vacation in Hisarya” (65) or the seaside bungalow camp in Ravda (127), which merge together traveling and the shift from work to leisure, from everyday life at home to leisure. Such spatial and temporal distinctions cannot be defined as identities. They bring about temporary, situated identifications with incompletely defined figures of social imagination. In fact, in her earlier works, for example in *Inequality, Discourse, Inheritance* (2013), Stoika Penkova conceives of such distinctions,

free from the logic of the same, as intensities, and argues that negative identity is not as a social counterposition but a threshold beyond which intensity develops into a qualitative category. The trace of this methodological discovery can also be recognized in the present study, in the accounts of affects as energy (136–7), or the discussion of utopia as an attempt to tap on the energy of future in the present (102).

(3) Of course, Stoyka Penkova does not and would not claim that hatred is an achievement of the hated. Instead, her insightful analyses show that any social inequality involves an exchange of gazes among the agents. To revisit the airport scene, it is described from the viewpoint of a witness who, on the one hand, sees how the police sees the Roma passengers as a risk, yet, on the other hand, the witness sees how the Roma see how they are seen as a danger; on the third hand, however, the witness sees himself in the place of Roma, and sees how she sees herself as one of them, alienated, paralyzed, non-identical to herself. Moreover, even later, the witness is still engulfed by a triple vision because she remembers how she saw how the police saw a risk, and, at the same time, that the Roma passengers were not dangerous (203). In short, the researcher discovers his own point of view only through a game of seeing without which any observation on everyday-life hatred would be impossible.

The exchange of gazes, however, is a necessary condition not only for recognizing the social positions of others, but also for recognizing oneself as an affective other. If we come back to the scene from the New York subway, the disgusted lady is transfigured from “a woman with a fur hat [and] ... an elegant fur coat” into “a woman ... with nose holes and eyes huge.” The transfiguration, however, takes place in the eyes of the black girl, who until a moment ago was unable to see the object of the woman's gaze. In a moment, the black girl will recognize herself as the object, but, in the interval between the two moments, the nose-holed, huge-eyed face is not another passenger in the subway, it is a specular other emerging from the distorted features of the head with the fur hat. The hatred is made visible precisely

by the distortion of the head, as if dislodged from the fabric of the social world. To summarize, hatred is visible only in the memory of a gaze of another who does not truly see because she is consumed by fantasies. In other words, one can see oneself hated only in the blind eyes of another. This is the reason why such acts of everyday aggression are performed by actors who see themselves as hated rather than hating. In this case, it is not inconceivable that the woman in the expensive fur coat, while getting up from her seat so as not to touch the little black girl, perceived herself as an enlightened, liberal lady, not only not racist, but quite the opposite: 'they' violated her private space; instead of confronting 'them', she politely distanced herself. If we take into account the play of gazes, the discomposure of bodies, the desire for blindness, then hate is indeed a practical achievement: although they do not reject themselves, the affective others themselves see that they are rejected insofar as they recognize themselves as the objects of the other's blind gaze.

4. Evaluation of the applicant's personal contribution

As a researcher, Stoyka Penkova has a wealth of contributions. She has developed tools for studying the social roots of affects, the logic of social exclusion, the praxis of inequalities, the dark shadows of excellence. A small but significant contribution: Penkova's concept of inequality explains the negligible effect of media campaigns, education programs focusing on tolerance, legal norms sanctioning hate speech have. However, the crucial contribution of Stoyka Penkova as a sociologist is that she invites us to understand instead of resorting to quick and convenient moral judgments. Because of that, Stoyka Penkova has indeed managed to fulfill her ambition "to keep affective histories ... 'alive' and 'present'" (130). I believe that this is a rare and difficult achievement not only in sociology of social

stratification, but also in critical discourse analysis and even in present-day ethnomethodology.

5. Questions

In conclusion, I would like to ask two questions. (1) Is it possible to abstract the approach from the molecule of hatred, and apply it to social groups that are not excluded, but are rather abandoned, in the sense of Elisabeth Povinelli (for example, pensioners or the reserve army of labor displaced in the periphery of economic life, in small towns, underdeveloped areas and villages). (2) In conclusion to the last chapter, Stoyka Penkova mentions “agents who, by imposing their own limits of possibility on the existing social order of differences, thereby change it...” (302). Indeed, such agents are beyond the scope of the study, but this is a potential line of problematization that is particularly interesting to me. Therefore, I would like to ask Stoyka Penkova whether she has already managed to identify such agents, or their existence is still a hypothesis.

Conclusion

The documents and publications submitted by Stoyka Petrova Penkova meet all the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADSRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the ADSRB and the relevant Regulations of the Plovdiv University. The candidate in the competition has presented a sufficient number of texts published after the defense of her PhD thesis and her habilitation as an associate professor. The candidate's publications are original scientific contributions. Her research and teaching performance is unquestionably excellent, and it fully complies with the

minimum national and university standards. After reviewing the documents and publications presented for the competition, I am giving my positive assessment and I am recommending to the Jury to affirm Stoyka Petrova Penkova as an appropriate candidate for the academic position "Professor" at the Plovdiv University in higher-education area 2. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Historical sociology of inequality and discourse).

Respectfully:

Prof. Dr Todor Hristov

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Sofia