

REVIEW

By DSc. Milena Iakimova, Professor at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

regarding the materials submitted for participation in the competition

for appointment to the academic position “**Professor**”

at **Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski”**,

in: higher education field 3. Social, economic and legal sciences,

professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (Historical sociology of inequality and discourse)

In the competition for “Professor”, announced in the State Gazette, No. 96/11.11.2025, and on the website of Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski” for the needs of the Department of Applied and Institutional Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History, the sole candidate participating is Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoyka Petrova Penkova from Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski”.

By order of the Rector of Plovdiv University No. RD-22-38 of 09.01.2026, I was appointed a member of the scientific jury in the above-mentioned competition with a single candidate: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoyka Penkova.

The set of materials submitted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoyka Penkova is in compliance with the requirements of the Higher Education Act, its implementing regulations, and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of PU and includes the following documents:

- Application form to the Rector for admission to the competition (standard form);
- CV in European format;
- Diploma for educational-qualification degree “Master” – original or notarized copy;
- Diploma for educational and scientific degree “Doctor” – original or notarized copy;
- Diploma (certificate) for the academic position “Associate Professor”;
- List of scientific works;
- Scientific works (copies of publications);
- Statement of compliance with the minimum national requirements;
- Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;
- Abstracts of the materials under Art. 76 (1) of the University Regulations (in Bulgarian and a foreign language);

- Self-assessment of contributions;
- List of citations;
- Document (certificate) of employment record;
- Documents on teaching activities;
- Documents on research activities;
- Other documents (two official notes regarding forthcoming publications);

All provided scientific works (one monograph and eighteen articles and studies) fall within the scope of the competition, have not been submitted in previous competitions for academic degrees or positions, and are accepted for review.

Biographical presentation

The profile of the sole candidate fully overlaps with the subject field and characteristics of the announced competition. The educational and scientific trajectory of Assoc. Prof. Stoyka Penkova is entirely embedded in and devoted to Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski” – from her bachelor’s degree through her master’s to the doctorate defended in 2010. Her teaching career also developed at Plovdiv University, beginning in 2003 with a position of assistant professor, passing through habilitation ten years later, up to her participation in the present competition. It must be said that the development of Stoyka Penkova’s teaching and research activity has contributed to the establishment of the Sociology program at PU, to its prestige, and to the departments that provide its teaching and research. Assoc. Prof. Penkova’s scholarly inquiries in the fields of sociology of discursive practices and the praxeological study of inequality have persisted over the years. In short, she is an excellent example of purposeful and dedicated academic development.

The biographical note — to put it this way — is striking in the volume of administrative load the candidate has managed to combine with her scholarly and teaching work.

General characterization of the candidate’s activity

The submitted documents outline the profile of a “complex player”: Assoc. Prof. Stoyka Penkova consistently maintains, develops, and combines research and teaching activities.

Assoc. Prof. Penkova teaches various courses in five undergraduate and four master’s programs at PU. From the provided record it is clear that 1/ her teaching load is substantial, 2/ the courses she teaches are grouped in the areas of sociology of inequalities and sociology of discursive practices, and 3/ in addition to classroom teaching, Assoc. Prof. Penkova engages in various forms of practical work with students at different educational levels (notably the summer practice “Inequalities and Social Suffering”) and in organizing student scientific sessions.

Assoc. Prof. Penkova conducts an English-language course for Erasmus students, as well as two doctoral courses. She has also supervised three doctoral students who successfully defended their PhD theses and already have academic careers.

The competition dossier contains one original monograph (an impressive 426 standard pages) in Bulgarian, ten articles — four of which are published in journals indexed in

international databases — and eight studies. Of the publications, eight are co-authored (which adds teamwork to the complexity); seven are in English and the remaining eleven are in Bulgarian.

Since 2014 Stoyka Penkova has presented — individually or jointly with research partners — forty-seven papers at various scientific fora, including eleven international conferences.

Since 2017 she has led three research projects, one funded by the National Science Fund (NSF) at the Ministry of Education and Science and two by the University's NSF. All three fall within the competition's subject area, one aiming to orient research toward educational practices and activities related to the competition topics. As a participant she has been involved in twelve other projects, eight of which relate to the competition's field.

Through project work, in developing and updating curricula for the lecture courses she teaches, in informal seminars with doctoral students, and with both junior and senior scholars, Assoc. Prof. Penkova has become the heart of an active and sustained informal group for discussion and praxeological research on social inequality, suffering and vulnerability.

This outlines the profile of a researcher with serious and focused scholarly production, linked to vigorous teaching and oriented toward renewing the Faculty's academic staff. This profile is also confirmed by the statement of compliance with the minimum national requirements for the academic position "Professor": with a minimum required 550 points, Assoc. Prof. Penkova has amassed 840 points. The most significant excess is in group E indicators (project activity and doctoral supervision). There is also an excess in citation indicators, a sign of recognition of her scientific contributions.

Substantive assessment of the scholarly works and their contributions

For the competition the candidate submitted one original monograph and eighteen other publications, demonstrating four distinct but interwoven circles of systematic research interest: historical sociology of discursive practices; sociology of the body, affectively and discursively entangled and always woven into locally organized situations, a sociology of the body *вхичх* gives rise to an affective sociology of inequality and a praxeology of life transitions; a biocultural approach to social assemblages; praxeological analysis of village transformations.

I will begin this part of the review with commentary on the large-scale ambitious project for an affective-discursive sociology of inequality developed in the monograph "Figures of Distinctiveness. Figures of Affectivity", whose contributions lie in **outlining a new research field** and formulating a series of **original scientific hypotheses**. Here, with methodological breadth and analytical diligence, the field of a sociology of affective inequality is delineated — inequality understood (following Harold Garfinkel) as a "continuous practical achievement in local situations of interaction." In outlining this field, various conceptual sources, characters and inspirations are assembled: from reflexive sociology of practice (Pierre Bourdieu and followers) and archaeological studies of discourse (Michel Foucault), with which Stoyka Penkova worked already in her bachelor thesis, through ethnomethodology (Harold Garfinkel) and conversation analysis (Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff), through practical logic research conducted by members of ICSS incorporating ordinary language philosophy into praxeology (Deyan Deyanov, Svetlana Sabeva, Todor Petkov, Stoyka Penkova herself and her defended doctoral student Milena Tasheva), up to the so-called affective turn in post-Deleuzian affect philosophy (Brian Massumi, William Connolly) and feminist critiques of the affect-emotion-discourse distinction (Sara Ahmed, Margaret Wetherell). By outlining this research

field, an apparatus of a praxeology of affectations is constructed — of affectations between bodies, places and things — which aspires to be a work of justice: to heal the wounded “affective others,” those whose possibility for self-actualization and entering into a humane relation with themselves is blocked. It also seeks to outline strategies for interrupting the inheritance of this woundedness as social vulnerability.

The apparatus is thickened with analysis of various “affective-discursive” social forms that run through parts of the monograph: the exemplary cooperative peasant at the dawn of state socialism, the abject image of the cockroach, the Black little girl in the New York subway at Christmas Eve, four Roma at Sofia’s night airport. These are excellent phenomenological vignettes that substantiate the conceptualization of the developed core opposition between “positive distinctiveness” as “having a world” and “negative distinctiveness” of “affective otherness” as “deprivation.” These affective-discursive figures guide us through the conceptual network and practical-logical formulas, aiming to demonstrate distinctiveness, inequality and exclusion as affective “doings,” often the eerie price of intragroup solidarity. Along this analytical line, manifestations of hatred, fear and disgust are demonstrated as “technologies of affect” that create, practically “do,” affective otherness as deprivation, “corporalized vulnerability,” an ontology of estrangement, “self-not-identification.” These affect technologies are traced in empirical analyses of media-propagated hate-speech discourse toward refugees and of the “invisible” ordinary “racism” toward Roma people in Bulgaria, intensified during the days of the COVID pandemic.

The first part of the monograph addresses an “affective ontology of closeness” and outlines an image of distinctiveness as practical doing (including “doing life transitions”) and as inheritance through the example of transformations in a Bulgarian village. It receives, from the regime of state socialism, the status of exemplary because it was turned into an agricultural cooperative (*TKZS*) in the early years of state socialism and the collectivization of agriculture. Through this example it is argued that places also have distinctiveness. This part relies on archival sources, with the primary one being a *BOOK of impressions handwritten by visitors to the agricultural cooperative “G. Dimitrov” in the village of Razhevo-Konare, Plovdiv region*, kept from 1948 to 1971, which is considered an “affective-discursive practice.” From it emerge curious views on socialist modernization (which, however, remain outside the interests of the study of distinctiveness and its inheritance): how with feudal methods (“compulsory labor,” “campaign harvesting,” mobilizing children and elders to perform exhausting labor) the infrastructure of biopolitical power is built, whose dispositives though are introduced not to multiply the population’s capacities but for showcase purposes: “on the occasion of visits by ministers of health of democratic countries,” as one cited document reads. I will return to this first part in the notes and critical comments section. From my perspective, the main and substantial contributions here are the ideas for a “socioanalysis of place” (which, however, is tripped up by its own empirical grounding) and the praxeological understanding of life transition as a period of vulnerability (an understanding that does not need Razhevo Konare to be valid).

The second part of the monograph frames a field for inspiring research that, I am sure, Stoyka Penkova will carry out with her students, doctoral candidates and followers: the frame of an unconventional sociology of inequality and exclusion. This sociology seeks to capture the flow of affective exchanges, their resonance with figures of representation and the consequences corresponding to the resonance between affect (an intensive flow) and its qualification: fixation and inheritance of social inequivalence and a mutilated self-perception in non-self-identification. The review and systematization of different perspectives within the so-called affective turn in the humanities and social sciences is very useful for constructing subsequent research ventures. Undoubtedly valuable is the argument against a sharp separation

and opposition between affect and discourse: “The turn to affect actually raises important questions regarding practices of meaning-making of ordinary life — how that meaning is made by agents and poured into their discursive practices,” and discourse “is understood beyond words as affective-discursive.” I would add that the opposition between affect and discourse in some of the referent authors is sometimes staged and dramatized and actually hides a body-language opposition. But insofar as language is always in use, it IS body. There is more to work on in the relation between affect and emotion — at times they are synonyms (both “dynamic, fluid, relational”), at other times affect is presented as a process “dynamic, fluid, relational” and emotion as its social and shareable qualification. From my perspective (and that of Deleuze and Massumi) affect and emotion are heterogeneous things: affects are intensities, and emotions reduce them and are qualities; the relation between the two is not correspondence but resonance. Affectivity and emotional regime do not belong to the same ontological order: affectivity is intensity; intensity and intense differences trigger processes. Processes generate forms. This is asserted in places in Stoyka Penkova’s work: “emotion refers to the processing and ‘packaging’ of affect into cultural categories familiar to us as human beings — anger, grief, love, fear, schadenfreude, etc.” In places, however, the two are synonymous — once because emotion is synonymized with affect, another time because affect is synonymized with emotion and is understood as a qualified experience with its “registers.” It is desirable to overcome this wavering. Not least, we should note that these terms belong to particular discursive corpora: as Thomas Dixon writes, it is no accident that no one has written a treatise on the emotions of the soul or the passions of the psyche.

Another set of valuable scientific contributions of the work is the study of the spillover among “hatred, fear and disgust as ‘technologies of affect’” and — to add now — the demonstration that through them “our” privileged status and “their” inequivalence are established, but also “their” dangerous identity, the threat that “they” might breach “our” border. I would say that precisely this constitutive ambivalence gives rise to abject forms and images like that of the cockroach in the account of the affective collision in the subway.

As the most significant achievement in this unconventional sociology of inequality, conceived and studied as affective-discursive praxeological phenomena, is the demonstration of the interactive, intercorporeal dynamics of affective otherness, which, absorbing affects, begins to emit them back and becomes affective-affecting.

In addition to her main habilitation work, Assoc. Prof. Penkova applies to this competition with 18 studies and articles. Many of them prepare the large monographic study and share some of its contributions. Publications 2 and 5 have traced the praxeological redefinition of the concept “life transition.” Publications 8 (co-authored with Milena Tasheva) and 11 contain a theoretical contribution to clarifying the logic of equivalentialization in what Ernesto Laclau calls “chains of equivalence”: the practical logic of linking into a chain of equivalence is “practical deindexicalization through induction.” The discovery of this mechanism can be used in the analysis of other language games (such as populism, for example).

Another group of contributions arises from the candidate’s and her co-authors’ entry into a relatively underdeveloped field in the Bulgarian-language space, that of the sociology of ecology. In publications 1 and 3 a praxeological approach to interactions and relations between human and non-human actors in constituting pro-ecological behaviors and communities is developed. This approach culminates in the development of a concept of anthropobiotic community.

The listed contributions in the monographic study are the candidate's personal contributions. Her frequent co-author in other materials submitted for the competition is Milena Tasheva. It is difficult to disentangle individual contributions in their joint publications, but this is actually a positive assessment of the organic nature of those texts. In the monograph, the merits of Milena Tasheva for Stoyka Penkova's ideas are duly and respectfully acknowledged.

Stoyka Penkova's publications have been substantially cited in the work of scholars and researchers both from the circle of her collaborators and followers, and by scholars outside that circle, including several foreign colleagues. The citation record indicates an established scholar with an imprint decidedly exceeding her own institutional environment.

Additionally, as seen not only from citations but also from the record of the candidate's research activity, it is clear that her innovative inquiries and organizational energy and skill have become a driving force and glue for a stable informal group of researchers of inequalities, suffering and vulnerability, which has also involved civil activists.

Critical remarks and recommendations

With such innovative and theoretically ambitious work, many comments usually arise. Precisely for this reason I directed some of my recommendations in the contributions section — the wavering of some theses stems from the innovativeness of the work and should not be listed as its weakness, but rather as a marker of the lively course of thought and research. Below I address problematic points which, although I treat them mostly as opportunities, do not arise from the innovativeness of the research.

The affective sociology of inequality as affectively done in everyday interactional practices requires recording and investigation of everyday (of course affective) scenes of interaction. There is only one such scene, and it comes from a strongly affect-charged memory of Stoyka Penkova. Otherwise the analysis is based on pieces of discourse — both in the analysis of hate-speech discourse toward the refugee and in the case of racism toward the Roma. But the developing unconventional sociology of inequality imperatively requires research on everyday scenes of doing inequality with affects, scenes of affective encounters. From this follow three points: 1/ in the future it will be necessary to invest effort in developing research techniques for recording everyday scenes of doing inequalities with affect; 2/ it is necessary to more clearly distinguish the discursive functions of “Roma” and “Romanness”: as (in a socioanalytic sense) a defense mechanism of projection, of relocating one's own hated traits onto the other; as an assertion of one's own superiority; as a figure of *ressentiment*; 3/ the second discursive function listed is pointed out in the monograph: self-affirmation of “us” through denying “them”, which elliptically affirms the significance of a trait that “they” lack, and which trait is correspondingly elliptically (and paralogically) affirmed as privileged (through its absence in the affective other). This is the logic through which Maya Grekova defines the construction of minority in “Minority: social construction and experience” (2001, Sofia: Critique and Humanism Publishing). This study, as well as Grekova's analysis of the figure of otherness (“I and the Other. Dimensions of Otherness in the Post-totalitarian Society”, 1996, Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press) cannot be bypassed. Related but different is my next note: in the valuable and empathically committed second part of Stoyka Penkova's monograph there is a recurring slippage between “inequality” and “exclusion.” Georg Simmel, who inspires parts of the analysis, defines inequality in constant relation to and even in opposition to exclusion. If I return to Maya Grekova's analyses, inequality presupposes hierarchization — that is, a shared symbolic frame — whereas exclusion places the other outside that shared frame. Such a distinction is much needed. If, from/in the perspective of the

sociology of inequality as affective-discursive practice, such a distinction is redundant, this should be made explicit and justified.

My most serious doubts, however, concern the adequacy of the *TKZS* in Razhevo Konare for a “sociology of distinctiveness.”

First, I do not see how the used archival sources can support claims of “affective closeness” and “affective solidarity.” These sources reproduce a certain discourse with its objects, concepts and rules of utterance formation — a discourse that has no serious competition, that actually has no competition, despite the struggle between the two BZNSs for attracting peasants to a certain agrarian reform ideology and for its continuity with Stamboliyski’s reform.

It seems to me that a sociology of distinctiveness cannot leave unexamined the structural duplicity of exemplary status of — in this case — the place as exemplary for “many foreign delegations,” a place of showcase effervescence, of a top-down task for distinction: “a specially constructed distinctive place by the new power, meant to normalize the identity of future ‘exemplary’ cooperators.”

First, “place” is a category that cannot be accepted naively and ready-made, but must be redefined in the perspective of the developing unconventional sociology of affective inequality: place is a weave of ties of attraction and repulsion, spatially localized, creating affective identification and affective investments of actors in space. And here the actors are somehow paper-thin — the reader cannot imagine any real peasant person.

More importantly, the concept of power here is taken ready-made and naively: “the new power,” “the socialist power”: what are its specificities, forms of influence and objectification? What is the role of violence and its effects and affects in shaping this exemplary status? Isn’t there someone in “the village-turned-agricultural cooperative” who suffered, who complained that they “took” their land and animals (for example the “1/12 part of the village population [which] owns 55% of the entire arable land of Razhevo Konare”)? Is there no imposition of negative identity, dispossession of place, of identity, denial of habitus, injury? As part of the affective dynamics of distinctiveness?

From a certain point on, the very idea of discourse disappears from this part of the work and certain discursive objects are taken as NATURAL FACTS: “the arable land is sown with intensive crops,” “staffed with qualified people.” In the same vein is my skepticism about interpreting as spontaneous affectations the recitations of correct clichés of the general compulsory language, interpreting “slogans” as “conscious existential choices” without relating this to valid empirical material — and the *Book of Impressions* is not such material, much less can it be “evidence of affective (bodily) cohesion of all.”

Many more questions could be posed: how, for example, does urbanization associated with socialist industrialization affect the “continuously expanding, with many additional quanta, affectively energized ‘we’ and its symbolic decline”?

Overall, in this part the approach to the empirical material can be called voluntaristic and this is regrettable because it obstructs interesting theoretical reflections. At the end of this critical comment I will note two textbook points: Bourdieu’s apparatus is calibrated for studying relatively autonomous fields, autonomous from the field of power and from each other, and this is categorically not valid for societies of state socialism and planned economy. And the other point is that this type of research should take into account already conducted (even if using more conventional approaches) historical studies that trace the struggle for the symbols of the “agrarian ideology” between the two BZNS parties — BZNS and BZNS – Nikola Petkov —

which immediately preceded the period addressed in the monograph and the establishment of the *Book of Impressions*, a struggle that ended with the death of N. Petkov. See the chapter “The Bulgarian Village in the Years of Communism: Collectivization, Social Change and Adaptation” in the volume *NRB. From Beginning to End*. Edited by Ivaylo Znepolski; see also Mihail Gruev, *Ploughed Balks. Collectivization and Social Change in the Bulgarian Northwest in the 1940s–50s*, Sofia: Ciela, available online

(<https://minaloto.bg/wp-content/uploads/%D0%93%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5.pdf>)

Positioning the work within the field of existing research is the true path and test for innovative and unconventional approaches.

Personal impressions

Stoyka Penkova was a student from the second cohort of the Sociology program at Plovdiv University, where I began my teaching career. Her participation in the educational process was — in the language of her own research inquiries — distinctive. In the years since, Assoc. Prof. Penkova has earned a reputation as a thorough researcher and respected teacher. I can testify to this by the example of our joint participation on academic juries for various competitions.

Conclusion

Considering the quality and number of the scholarly works, their original scientific achievements and contributions, and taking into account Stoyka Penkova’s overall research and teaching activity and the respected name she has earned, I am categorical in my **positive** assessment and convinced that Plovdiv University will benefit by accepting her into its body of professors. I fully support her election to the rank of professor and recommend that the Scientific Jury prepare a report-proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy and History for the selection of Stoyka Petrova Penkova as Professor in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies (Historical Sociology of Inequality and Discourse).

Reviewer:

(Prof. Milena Iakimova, DSc)