

# Men in the Czech Republic

## A Few Questions and Thoughts on Studying (Some) Men

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**Abstract:** The text raises questions and themes relevant for introduction of 'men's studies' or 'critical studies on men and masculinities' in the Czech Republic. The general issue of gender studies, and the situation and context of men in the Czech Republic are the two main parts of the text. The former deals with the theoretical basis for research on men, while the latter explores empirical data that are already available on men, which may be used in further research. The concluding part illustrates some steps the author took while preparing the empirical inquiry into the life histories of men in the Czech Republic. The topic of her research: different men (non-manipulative, lacking the need to control others, emotional), leads her to question the existence of a single normative (hegemonic) masculinity in the Czech Republic. However, the absence of relevant data and studies leaves the definition of Czech masculinity open for now. The author suggests, in accordance with contemporary sources from Anglo-Saxon social science literature, the existence of a plurality and colourful forms of masculine identity, and emphasises the need to explore them, in order to enrich knowledge of gender studies in the Czech Republic.

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This text introduces a new theme of research in the Czech Republic: studies of men, manhood, manliness and masculinities. Men's studies, which are non-existent in this country, should supplement studies on women, adding new perspectives and questions, bringing new topics and views to problems under discussion in gender studies.<sup>1</sup> In the West, 'critical studies of men and masculinities' or 'men's studies' are today an important topic of research in sociology as well as in other social sciences. In the Czech Republic, men have not been studied yet, the theme of masculinities is often considered as unproblematic, or 'the man's role' is only discussed under other branches of sociological inquiry – mainly research on family. Men (and women still) are an 'exceptional' topic for general public opinion; it seems that there is 'no problem', each of us 'naturally' understands 'what is going on here'. To question the everyday experience and (re)define it as problematic, to list men's problems and study them, or just deconstruct the man's position and stereotypes of the 'norm' and point to prejudices will be a delicate task. Ethical care and caution will be a necessity in research on men.

Here are mentioned some ideas and thoughts on constraints and advantages of research on men in the Czech Republic, and there is an attempt to open topics and problems relevant for such research. I outline a few themes to start empirical research with, and on the basis of my own research project mentioned later in the text, I also suggest a way of

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<sup>1</sup>) Gender studies have been recently 'established' also in the Czech Republic as an academic discipline in social sciences dealing mostly with femininities but also masculinities as constructed identities.

launching it (instead of continually discussing the lack of one). For the purpose of this text, let me play with the following questions with no commitment to complete or exhaust this complex issue. The relevant questions are: What can and should be studied about men in the Czech Republic? What empirical data is already available? What is the context in which research on men is being introduced in the Czech Republic? Two general groups of topics concerning men derive from this: (1) *The gender issue in the Czech Republic*: How does research on women correspond with the idea of studying men (as well) here? What is the situation of women and men here? This more theoretical discussion will be followed in this text by an empirical account: (2) *The men here*: What is the dominant (normative) masculinity? What are other Czech masculinities like? What is the specific difference, if any, in the experience and situation of men during and after the totalitarian past of the Czech Republic? And what is similar and different in comparison to often discussed Western masculinities, or with manhood in yet other cultures? What are the historical changes in Czech masculinities?

### **The Gender Issue in the Czech Republic**

In the Czech Republic, feminist research on women started quite recently. Studies on women's position, experience and quality of life are still on the margins of public interest, though they do not seem marginal for the social sciences any more. Today we already have some data on the situation of women here, and a few pieces of information are available on men.<sup>2</sup> There have been some student theses and diploma research on men, several sections of books and essays also deal with particular problems that could be perceived as fitting with critical studies on men and masculinities.<sup>3</sup> Some sociologists mention that men is a theme they have planned and would like to devote attention to. Nevertheless, it has often remained in the appendix of their research interests, or some have managed to incorporate it within their main academic topics (the family, growing up, marriage crises psychotherapy, etc.). The time and environment was not ripe for discussion, or favourable for it to be initiated.

There are several alternatives to choose from when considering research on men: either use the track started by feminist research here, or try to introduce a complementary but distinctive men's studies approach, or a combination of the two. The latter approach is closest to my inclination: use knowledge of feminist research approaches and findings, be distinctive about men's gender and contexts, and yet consider the similarities and differences of each of them.

In the sphere of relationships between men and women, a discussion on the conditions, and lack of such conditions, for the rise of feminism in pre-November Czechoslovakia has slowly emerged [Wagnerová 1995; Šiklová 1993; Havelková 1993, 1997; etc.]

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<sup>2)</sup> These are in issues of *Sociologický časopis* 1/95, 4/97, [Heitlingerová and Trnková 1998], research on family structures (the large research project *Rodina* 1994 [*Rodina...* 1994]), public opinion research on images of men and women in Slovakia [Bútorová 1996], women and men in the media [*Žena...* 1998], young single women and men [*Stratifikace...* 1997], university educated men and women [*Čermáková* 1999, *Musilová* 1999, *Maříková* 1999b], etc.

<sup>3)</sup> Among them: Vybíral [1995] – “Flights from Love – Marriage crises from the mens' side”, Matoušek [1997] – “Growing Up As a Boy in Bohemia and Moravia”, or Hausmann's [1996] populist book on men's chauvinism; and several translations [Wieck 1994, Warshak 1996; Bly 1990; Badinter 1998] and book reviews, especially in the Slovak journal *Aspekt*.

but no such discussion has started on the necessity for men's studies. There is one specificity though, and that is the tendency in the Czech Republic to study women in relation with men, not to exclude men from feminist studies and research, as was the practice for some time in the West. This may have its origin in the sociological tradition of the Czechoslovak First Republic (1918-1938), where the women's question was present, accompanied by the question: 'And what about men here, too?' [Havelková 1993: 62-73].

What is the historical, political and social situation in the Czech Republic? Do we have any relevant data to start with – that is, the empirical context for research on men and masculinities now? There has been a large gap in the historical surveys of women and men in this region. And there are many aspects of Czech masculinity that have not been analysed either psychologically or in sociology. Once we choose to study it, we should endeavour to learn and start from our history. The context of the Czech Republic today reflects the situation of a society in transition, partly transformed, with stubborn remnants of the past totalitarian regime. It is not only the transition after 1989 that has brought changes and differences in the situation of gender relationships (and studies), experience from a more remote past should also be taken into consideration. The historical experience of our small landlocked European country, for several centuries ruled over by great-powers could give some clues to explaining the mild – in contrast to America – 'egalitarian' attitudes among men and women.

The historical specificity of Czech masculinities, both independently and in their relation to femininity and women's identities, should be opened to discussion. What was the impact of the following events on constructions of masculine identity: the 'tradition' (or myth) of the Czechoslovak First Republic (1918-1938), the influence of World War II, the 'building communism' era of the 1950's, the Prague Spring of 1967, the invasion of August 1968, the normalisation of the 1970's, Charter 77 (and dissident activities in general), November 1989, the transformation processes after 1989, and the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993? Havelková [1997: 61] identifies two major mistakes in our level of particular historical experience in her theoretical analysis of conditions for feminist research in the Czech Republic. These apply to and should not be ignored by studies of masculinities, nor by gender studies in general. In the socialist era, the status of women was imposed from above – it would be a mistake to regard it as an independent self-assertive process. The second important point is the underestimation of "the impact of long-term persisting structures, those from the pre-communist past, which influenced communist society, and those acquired under socialism, which also affect the face of the present societal transformation" [Ibid.]. It remains an open question what these long-persisting structures are.

Another study is needed in order to place our experience and situation within the context of European history and territory, and to try to define our role and place in it. A discussion on the situation of women and feminisms in the context of East and West or East in contrast to West is already underway [Funk and Mueller 1993, *Gains...* 1994; Kostash 1993, Nicholson 1990, Renne 1997, Saleci 1994, Scott, Kaplan and Keates 1997], whereas a discussion on men's (and women's together with men's) situation has yet to be launched in the Czech Republic. To study men (and masculinities) means to open discussions that reach beyond borders: of the Czech Republic, and of sociology. Deconstruction or change of the image and identity of men is only a part of much broader processes: desired change in value systems, discussion on new forms of partnerships and

personal identity construction, the perceived crises/fall of modern man (woman), and so forth.

### **Men and Masculinities in the Czech Republic**

Men in the Czech Republic (and women too) were in a different situation than men in the West. It would be tricky to adopt or 'translate' theories of masculinities from the West to our conditions and reality; some concepts popular and valid in the West do not apply here. It is clearly visible when we try to incorporate an image of men in the real socialism period into our present picture. A certain forced/involuntary feminisation of Czech men is frequently mentioned in this context [Šíklová 1993, Frišová 1993, Havelková 1997, Šťastná 1998]; men did not have the possibility of self-assertion in 'masculine' spheres, that is, in, for example, professional careers, or politics (except for sports and games). Their position was similar to men in the West in some sense: men had higher salaries (*Sociologický časopis* 1/95, 4/97), some patriarchal structures worked to their advantage [*Politika...* 1996, *Žena...* 1998], they were (and were perceived as) those in power. Men have also been perceived as having no problems [Matoušek 1997, Vybíral 1995], and as emotionally tougher than women [Možný 1983]. Yet, it was contrasting in another sense: there was no chance of a professional career except 'to bend your back' for the Communist Party, not a favourable condition for playing the macho type.

The family, which represented the only widespread fortress of relative freedom, autonomy and security, has become increasingly deconstructed since 1989. New opportunities for self-realisation are emerging and there are several tendencies in people's orientation towards them (depending on socio-economic and demographic situation).<sup>4</sup> Some men in the Czech Republic now tend more to the conventional division of sex roles (the man as the breadwinner, the woman as caregiver and house-keeper – sometimes full-time housewife), for others little has changed in their structuring of family life after 1989. The empirical data available from research on family indicate that there is a split between the ideal and real division of men's and women's activities within the family structure, while the existence of specific men's and women's activities is not questioned ["Rozdělení..." 1998]. A list of activities of men in the Czech family may lead us in an attempt to define attributes of Czech masculinity. Perceived distinctive men's activities are: building a career (45%), and financially securing the family (74%). What men really do is: secure the household financially (48%), engage in social and political functions (22%), and work for their professional career (30%).<sup>5</sup> Men are more conservative in changing the *status quo* [Maříková 1999: 64], but these qualities do not distinguish Czech men from men elsewhere in western societies.

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<sup>4</sup>) Questions immediately arise. What are the tendencies? Which environment produces which orientations? Do there have to be any specific conditions for alternative choices? What people tend to conventional role models and who inclines to alternative tracks? What are the tracks? (My curiosity has led me to prepare a study on this: on men's life strategies different from the mainstream trend/norm/stereotype.)

<sup>5</sup>) Results also show that men in the Czech Republic do the shopping more often than is supposed. Women educate themselves more, financially support the household, cultivate social contacts, engage in social functions, work hard for their professional career also more than is the general image ["Rozdělení..." 1998].

Little data is available specifically on Czech masculinities. From the period before 1989, there is one relevant study – an appendix to Možný's [1983: 155-174] research from 1979 on marriages of university-educated partners *The Empirical Measurement of Cultural Norms of Personal Characteristics of Masculinity and Femininity*. His quantitative research findings indicate a move towards a transitional state of men's and women's role in the family [Ibid.: 63-66]. Možný [Ibid.: 161] defines the 'traditional man' and his characteristics for the context of research in the Czech Republic in late 1970's. It is supposed that the 'traditional man' is: psychically tough, prefers to lead, rational, assertive, independent, realistic, deliberate, ambitious, rough, and reticent.<sup>6</sup> Možný does not specify though potential differences of such a definition for the reality of Czechoslovakia. He assumes the existence of a single model of masculinity for Euro-American culture. Nevertheless, Možný's appendix gives us a good basis to start new research studies on men and masculinities in the Czech Republic now, especially because of its historical value and the possibility to compare it with recent studies.

A contemporary pioneering empirical research by a student into masculinity (regarding the context of this country's particularity) has been conducted Šťastná [1998]<sup>7</sup>, supporting hypotheses of a gentler, more family-oriented masculinity. Her research on fathers and sons shows Czech men as bearers of the following traits: fathers are laborious and apt, careful, tolerant and understanding, and men in general are required to be manly (self-confident, dominant, sensible, tough), independent, competitive but also careful, mild, strong and compassionate, they should be neither romantic (feminine, oversensitive), passive, nor 'macho'. The value of work (activity, ability, skill, robustness) and support of family values (care, friendliness) are the strongest traits, and Šťastná concludes that the main difference between Czech men and their western counterparts is the presence of mildness, or a mild femininity, which may or may not be remnant of the totalitarian past.

There is one more text where the specificity of Czech personality types is discussed. In a research study report [Bušta 1996]<sup>8</sup>, there were two descriptions characteristic for male gender personality in the Czech Republic: (1) 'Venca' – Jack of all trades and master of most of them, handyman (about 50 years old, married, low education, spends most of his time in his garage mending things), and (2) 'Robert' – a self-made man, the actor of change (no-time father, under 30 or then 40-49, educated, living in a city, very high income). The Venca type is often described as the 'typical Czech', and Robert represents the new western model of masculinity including doubts and uncertainty about his lifestyle.

These few data that are available inspire me in my endeavour to learn more, especially as I want to describe stereotypes connected with the 'male norm', and find alternative models of masculinity that are present but not adequately manifested in our images, or a single image of Czech masculinity.

<sup>6</sup>) Možný respects the assumption of one-dimensionality of the masculine-feminine scale, and thus characteristics of femininity (as minimal masculinity) are the reverse.

<sup>7</sup>) Another student's research is on young men by Ivan Vodochodský [1998] where he analyses ways of self-presentation of his male classmates.

<sup>8</sup>) It was a study in marketing, searching for new criteria (when usual demographic indicators would not apply) according to which people are stratified in society, what lifestyles people have. The key new criteria found for the Czech Republic was the active-passive attitude to life.

## Instead of Conclusions

Here I suggest the crucial importance of initiating a discussion and critical research on men and masculinities development in the Czech Republic. It is likely that our research will follow the development of such studies known in the West. Nevertheless, the Czech tradition of doing research both on women and on men may, in doing gender studies, cause a shift from western models with a tradition of feminist research on women and research on men conducted within men's studies.

A necessary step towards answering the questions listed in the text is an inquiry into subjective realms of experience of individual men in research studies on the life stories of Czech men. More (and qualitative) studies of social aspects and effects of transformation processes are needed to follow the available economic and political overviews.<sup>9</sup> My personal project in research on men and masculinities is a qualitative research collecting personal life histories (narratives) that should help us start to catch the context in which masculine identity has been and is being formed. Subjective interpretations of historical (social, political and economic) events and processes can help us understand individual men's strategies and ambitions, as well as the constraints and limitations in their being a man in the Czech Republic today.<sup>10</sup>

I have already touched upon the topic of my research in the text, now it is necessary for me to specify the direction of my exploration in the field of men's studies. There is the perceived trend in our society towards an adoption of western models, images of masculinity (masculinities) not excluded. And yet there are men in the country who resist the temptations of a (free) market society and its opportunities and pleasures. They have not begun striving for a professional career as their goal in life. I have decided to collect the narratives of men who do not represent the mainstream masculinity, those who have decided to drift against the stream. Librová [1994] describes these types of men as 'compassionate authorities': a strong, manly type, driven by compassion, resolute in action, capable of altruism, patience and love. They direct their energy towards protecting others, and do not use their power for self-assertion, domination, manipulation and control over others.

Among them, there are men who do so voluntarily – as their 'personal project' (1), or a 'natural drift' (2), as well as men who did not have any other choice and have still sometimes managed to build and live a satisfactory and rewarding life – as a 'virtue of necessity' (3). What are their masculinities like? What has influenced them? What would be their definitions of Czech masculinities? How do they reflect upon and interpret events and processes in the Czech Republic? I expect these men to be aware of their different masculinity, and through this distinctness (and their definition of it) I will try to draw traits of masculinities that are present in the Czech Republic, and describe negative stereotypes of the norm against which these men define themselves.

Such inquiry covers many questions: do we know what the 'norm' is, here and now? Should I try to define it? What is the hegemonic masculinity in this country? And

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<sup>9</sup>) For some information on social transformations of Czech society see reports of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic ([www.soc.cas.cz](http://www.soc.cas.cz)).

<sup>10</sup>) A similar research for women and femininities should accompany it. There already exists a project of the Gender Studies Foundation in Prague *Memories of Women: All Our Yesterdays* [Paměť... 1998].

who is the bearer of it – since from the totalitarian past, there might be serious doubts about the existence of its traditional representatives: the middle classes (in our ‘classless society’)? What re-definitions and fragmentation has it been undergoing? If we do not know what Czech masculinity is, and if ‘what it means for Czech men to be a man’ is not reflected - how can I do research on alternatives to it?

There are, and always have been, many forms of masculinities, many intermingling types, and I want their plurality to be stressed (and later grasped in research studies). Men’s subjective interpretations of expectations towards them as men will indicate at least how some men deal with it, and how explicit or implicit such expectations were for them in their life histories. And for the different Czech men of my research, what were the influences and impulses that made them wander off-the-beaten track? Then there will be something to start with, perhaps something controversial, fascinating, or even boring.

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