

Jiří Večerník at 70

Doc. Ing. Jiří Večerník, CSc., senior fellow and head of the Department of Economic Sociology at the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, and a friend and colleague, is 70.

He trained in communist Czechoslovakia and went on to become the careful chronicler of Czechoslovakia's and the Czech Republic's road out of communism and into capitalist democracy. He has done his rejuvenated nation the inestimable service of educating it about itself in a crucial period of its history, in the process leaving a solid record of that period for posterity and producing an exceptionally robust body of factual analysis in the otherwise muddled field of transitology.



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doc. Ing. Jiří Večerník, CSc.

As many of the young at the time, he was not able to study what he would ideally have wanted. His interests were and have remained philosophy and history and his instinctive leanings in sociology towards the theoretical. His studies were in economics and finance, and his research has been principally statistical. Had he been free to do as he wanted, his career would most likely have been different and we might have been a philosophical sociologist richer and an empirical one poorer. I count this as a fortunate unintended consequence of authoritarianism.

His first degree was in 1963. After a stint in a state bank and one year of military service, Jiří Večerník drifted into academic research at Charles University and the Academy of Sciences. During this period he joined the research team established by Pavel Machonin to produce an empirical survey on social stratification. He was one of the authors of the book *Czechoslovak Society*, edited by Machonin and others, which appeared in 1969, and that same year defended his dissertation on the sociology of consumption (although his doctoral diploma was put away in the safe of Charles University and only released to him in 1987). In 1970, he found a reasonably safe, if junior, post in the Institute for Philosophy and Sociology of the Academy of Sciences, the successor institution to the Institute of Sociology, which was abolished in retaliation for the participation of many of its researchers in the reform movement.

Shortly after joining Charles University, he was awarded one of the first scholarships under the Franco-Czechoslovak cultural agreement and was able to spend half a year in Paris, where he attended lectures by Aron, Touraine, Lefebvre, Levi-Strauss, and others. This stimulated his theoretical interests and his interest in French intellectualism, but back in Czechoslovakia circumstances led him again in the direction of Anglo-Saxon empirical research and to, he has said himself, abandoning his theoretical ambitions.

In 1990, Jiří Večerník became one of the key operators in the resurrection of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences. He established the Department of Economic Sociology and became the first Editor-in-Chief of *Sociologický časopis* in the new era. In 1992 he launched its English language edition, *Czech Sociological Review*, of which he was editor again from 2002–2009.

Since 1990, Jiří Večerník has been not only among the leading Czech sociologists but also among the leading Czech social scientists on the international stage. He is now one of the internationally most quoted Czech social scientists. He joined the *Luxembourg Income Study* and became a member of its Executive Committee. He has been a visiting scholar at the European University Institute in Florence, the Institute for Fiscal Studies in London, the Russell Sage Foundation in New York, and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. He has contributed regularly as a national expert on various topics to projects of the World Bank, the OECD, the ILO, and the European Commission, where he served from 1999 to 2005 as an evaluator of EU research programmes and from 2004 to 2007 as a member of the network of non-governmental experts on social inclusion.

After 1990, in close collaboration with his colleague Petr Matějů, Jiří Večerník started a grand project of documenting through statistical analysis the Czech transition to, or rather resurrection of, capitalist democracy. This was formalised in 1996 in the project Social Trends, run by an inter-institutional team and involving empirical surveys, research bulletins, teaching activities, the establishment of the Sociological Data Archive at the Institute of Sociology, and the publication of synthesising Social Reports. The effort produced a raft of publications, not least from the hand of the ever productive Večerník, including three seminal books: *Markets and People: The Czech Reform Experience in a Comparative Perspective* (by Jiří Večerník, London 1996), *Ten Years of Re-building Capitalism, Czech Society after 1989* (edited by Jiří Večerník and Petr Matějů, Prague 1999) and *Czech Society in the 2000s: A Report on Socio-economic Policies and Structures* (by Jiří Večerník, Prague 2009).

Jiří Večerník is a reluctant sociologist, an empirical sociologist sceptical of empirical sociology, a statistician sceptical of his own statistics. A main achievement of his grand project is to show the relative ease with which the Czechs have made themselves again a normal nation in Europe—a finding about which its author is again sceptical. He is a middle-class nostalgic, something he describes as rooted in his own class origin, which was first a burden on his career and later more of an engine. In his recent research, he has been relentlessly on the hunt for

a re-emerging Czech middle class in the classical meaning, but to his disappointment has found little more than a quasi middle class grounded in the ever growing ranks of public sector bureaucrats. He continues to cultivate wide interests; he is a spirited pianist of 20th-century jazz music and a connoisseur of the Prague café scene and café music—as I can testify myself—where his mind finds contentment far from the field of sociology, be it....

In my review of the three books mentioned above in the *European Journal of Sociology* (2010, issue 3) I wrote: ‘These books represent an exceptional achievement and through them Jiří Večerník stands as one of the great European sociologists in a tradition that goes back to Frédéric le Play.’

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