

In Memoriam, Petr Matějů

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Petr Matějů was the most transformative Czech sociologist of his generation, whose leadership and scientific authority profoundly deepened the modernisation and internationalisation of Czech sociology since the Velvet Revolution.

Initially pursuing parallel careers in theatre and sociology in the 1970s, he dedicated his life fully to Czech sociology, particularly through his expertise in social stratification, inequality, and mobility, using loglinear and structural equation methods. Beginning with his intellectual breakthrough at the RC28 meeting in Budapest in 1984, his work was strongly influenced by the pioneers of social stratification research in the United States, and he quickly became one of the best known Czech sociologists abroad. In 1987, he smuggled politically sensitive survey data linking social position and communist party membership to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his research stay there, where he became a student and friend of Bob Hauser.



© Family archives

Petr Matějů

After the collapse of communism, he was the leading scientific authority in the quantitative analysis of the Czech social transformation. Along with Donald Treiman, Iván Széleányi, and others, he played a key role in the project 'Social Stratification in Eastern Europe after 1989 and Circulation of Elites', which produced seminal comparative research of social stratification and mobility in post-communist countries. He established Czech participation in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 1991, had a direct role in shaping ISSP Social Inequality and other surveys, and helped ensure Czech participation in ISSP surveys since that time. He similarly established Czech participation in the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), and countless other surveys of adolescents and adults.

His research on social stratification, inequality, and mobility is distinctive in its consistency of approach and conceptualisation. His life work was strongly

shaped by the Wisconsin model of social stratification, which emphasises the role of social-psychological factors, such as educational aspirations and cognitive ability, in educational and occupational attainment. He pioneered ways of measuring cognitive ability in the Czech educational context and in his later work extended the social-psychological approach to include dimensions of human capital often neglected in sociological research, such as personality, personal networks, and perceived attractiveness. He additionally framed his analyses in terms of Ralf Dahrendorf's conception of life chances and Alan Kerckhoff's insight into the role of educational institutions in structuring values and aspirations.

His pioneering study of the interplay of the objective and subjective conditions generating inequalities in educational opportunity was similarly reflected in his research on the crystallisation of meritocratic beliefs, social norms, and political orientations, particularly in terms of their rootedness in objective social position. Seeking to identify the mechanisms of stability and change in processes of social stratification, his research shed light on the transformation of social and political capital into economic capital as the dominant strategy of success in the post-communist transition, particularly in the reproduction of elites. The post-communist transition radically increased the importance of the openness of the educational system and the expansion of educational opportunities, which not only had economic (competitiveness), but also social (as a mechanism of social justice) and political significance (as a condition for deepening the rootedness of democracy).

More than any other sociologist of his time, Petr Matějů sought to secure Western standards of infrastructure and methodology for quantitative sociological research in the Czech Republic. Along with Jiří Večerník and a large team of researchers, in the 1990s he carried out the project 'Social Trends: Research—Archive—Publications—Education', in the framework of which was established the Sociological Data Archive, an extensive working paper series, cooperation between Prague- and Brno-based sociologists, and the integrative book *Ten Years of Rebuilding Capitalism: Czech Society after 1989*. Through his pioneering efforts to ensure Czech participation in leading international social surveys, through his dedication to professional survey design, management, and archiving, and through his incessant publication activity in international journals, he had a profound impact on the international visibility and reputation of the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences.

Petr Matějů believed that sociological research should not be conducted in ivory towers, but should passionately respond to the fundamental questions facing society, particularly the tumultuous social, political, and economic transformations of post-communist Czech Republic. He rejected research only for its own sake and sought to identify the policy implications of his empirical findings. In 2002, he established the Institute for Social and Economic Analyses (ISEA) in Prague to conduct independent policy research, because many of the policies he recommended challenged the invested interests of Czech academia. His research

on educational inequality became the cornerstone of the Czech Government's *White Paper of Tertiary Education*, which aimed to expand educational opportunities at the tertiary level, enhance the independence of universities from the state, and foster more research and development between universities and the private sector.

His empirical research demonstrated that Czech tertiary education, even if tuition-free, limited educational opportunity owing to the inability of the state to fund education at the highest level, thus limiting both the quality and quantity of education, and owing to the overwhelming impact, both direct and indirect, of family background on educational attainment. Concerned by how government not only neglected, but wittingly or unwittingly maintained the social selectivity of education, he became a foremost proponent of a system of student financial aid and other tools for expanding educational opportunity for students of lower social backgrounds. In his vision, student financial aid would be implemented along with a system of deferred tuition, based on Australian practice, according to which tuition is paid after university studies and only if one's income reaches above a certain level.

From 2007 to 2008 he was selected into the international team of Fulbright New Century Scholars on the theme 'Higher Education in the 21st Century—Access and Equity'. From 2006 to 2011 he also represented the Czech Republic in the Education Policy Committee of the OECD. In much of his policy work, he challenged the status quo—defined by the Czech Republic's status as having among the most socially selective and least expansive systems of secondary and tertiary education across developed nations—and faced the fierce opposition of critics who sought to maintain it.

Despite being so policy oriented—or precisely because of this—he understood the fundamental importance of basic research and was a foremost advocate of increased research funding for all forms of research institutions. In 2006–2010 he led efforts as a member of the Czech Government's Council on Research, Development and Innovation to make those investments more effective and to measure and track research productivity. In his role as President of the Czech Science Foundation from 2008–2014, he implemented a much deeper internationalisation of the scientific review process, supported the funding of large projects most likely to lead to scientific breakthroughs, and secured increases in government support for basic research. In all of these efforts, he did not shy from but rather encouraged and led public debate on education and science policy, and continued to believe in the power of public reason. But as is often the case with great public intellectuals, he faced caricature, misunderstanding, and censure when his ideas upended mainstream beliefs in the academic community.

Through all of these often exhausting responsibilities, as well as in other political roles, Petr Matějů never ceased to conduct his empirical research, working even in the last days of his life. He was equally committed to publishing in international peer-reviewed journals and to contributing to the Czech sociologi-

cal community, reflected in the fact that he is the most published author in the *Czech Sociological Review*. By many measures, he is the most cited Czech sociologist at home and abroad, a status that is likely to grow with time. A number of his manuscripts on social capital and the co-authored book (in Czech) *The Power of Beauty: Does Beauty and Attractiveness Help Achieve Life Success?* are just before publication. In addition, we cannot forget his significant teaching activity in the Czech Republic and abroad, at too many universities to list here. Last but not least, many of the most notable contemporary Czech sociologists worked closely with him or studied under his guidance.

While his research and policy reforms were not agreed with by all, even his critics acknowledge that he was a leading mind of his generation, whose ideas demanded careful deliberation, spawned a flurry of public debate, and commanded the respect of those around him. When the leadership of the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, closed down his research department, he felt deeply saddened that not more of his colleagues defended his lifelong contribution to the field, feelings he continued to harbour late in life.

On a more personal note, Petr was a man of tenacity and principle, and a great friend. I'll never forget when he wanted to meet up after he learned he would be a Fulbright New Century Scholar. I suggested a crummy wine cellar near my place in Dejvice. The awful wine didn't matter—he wanted to express his intense sense of redemption from the international scientific community, given the many travails he faced here at home, for the very same ideas. With time, my hope is that Czech social scientists will move beyond the episodes of friction and begin to understand the man that international colleagues cherished already years ago.

In fact, we first bonded about 14 years ago at the Anglo-American University (of which Petr was a co-founder), where we loved teaching and had endless conversations about the conditions necessary for a truly liberal arts college to prosper. He asked me to join his research team and we worked in tandem ever since. While Petr was known for his complex statistical tables and public persona, I knew him in a different way: he was a passionate synthesiser of ideas in the sociological tradition; he was prescient and forward-looking, identifying social problems and their urgency well before those around him; and he was a man of moral courage and leadership who stood up for his research and values, even in the face of derision by others. When people ask me how we were able to work together for so long, I feel that our time together was much too short.

Petr Matějů has departed from us at the early age of 66. The shock of the news of his passing away that many people felt was not because few knew of his long-term illness, but because he was a guidepost of Czech society that enabled all of us, both friends and critics, to orient ourselves. While he has passed away, his ideas have not. He leaves behind an extensive body of work—publications, surveys, policy proposals, institutions he founded or reformed, and researchers he trained. Without a doubt, both his life and his research output will continue to have a profound impact on Czech sociology for years to come.

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