

Jiří Večerník: *Markets and People. The Czech Reform Experience in a Comparative Perspective*

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Jiří Večerník's *Markets and People* based on the experience of the Czech social and economic reform is a new sociological book of Czech origin published in English, and thus accessible to the international professional community.

The text is divided into an introduction and five parts: the labour market and earnings, income differentiation and poverty, households as consumers and capitalists, escape from socialist paternalism, and economic reform and political behaviour.

The book represents a work in several respects not only unique in the Czech sociological output after 1989, but in the whole of the post-war period. It is namely one of a few scientific monographs dealing with a special topic, based on a long-lasting and systematic theoretical and empirical study of a clearly defined subject. In the field of (very largely conceived) economic sociology accompanied by extensive incursions into social policy it must be considered a pioneer work in the field of Czech sociology, while many economists will also welcome it as a contribution to their discipline. Some of the themes discussed in the book are seriously dealt with for the first time in Czech sociological literature. Its contents create a dignified sociological pendant and accompaniment to the existing, though not sufficiently synthesizing, Czech literature on economic transformation. It is also evident that the work is informed by more general 'transformation' and in particular 'modernisation' literature.

Regarding the scientific nature of the monograph, Večerník demonstrates a good knowledge and use of current domestic and foreign literature, the extensive application of empirical data of many types coming from a whole range of the author's own work, originally conceived surveys, from statistics, secondary analyses of other empirical research, from literary sources, as well as from the current day-to-day situation and its reflection in daily

information and standard journalistic production. Quantitative sociological and statistical data are elaborated and used on a good methodological level, applying sophisticated multi-variation analyses, and clearly presented in tables and graphs.

With regard to the scientific nature of Večerník's study some unconventional traits may be noted, the first of these being the concrete historical approach by means of which he realises his 'comparative perspective'. Practically everything in this book is discussed in contra-position and/or in understanding of analogies and relations to the former state socialist system; to other societies going through similar processes of post-communist transformation; as well as to the contemporary advanced Western societies. Taking into account the systematic critical analysis of the ongoing changes, which represents the essence of the book, along with the constant attention devoted to the unfinished processes – this all without outlining any apodictic 'one-way' prognoses – we come to the conclusion that the topic is theoretically reproduced as social change, as historical transformation of the Czech economy and society. There are not so many works which could compete in this respect, either in the Czech Republic or in other post-communist countries.

The only possible reservation in this connection concerns the brief passages dealing with the retrospective evaluation of the social and economic aspects of state socialism. J. Večerník has been one of the pioneers of empirical sociology since the 1960s and he knows intimately the problems of 'really existing socialism'. That is why he is able to characterise the nature of this system far more plastically than most of the younger domestic scientists and the majority of foreign ones. We may recall in this connection his pioneering work in revealing the egalitarianism and anti-meritocratism typical of state socialism. This time, however, he did not fully avoid somewhat declarative characteristics of the social and economic forms of the state socialist system; it seems that to a too large extent he abstracted from the whole complex of their genetic and causal linkages and historical metamorphoses. Let us hope that he returns in the future to this

topic in a more detailed special study. The undisputable influence of the 'legacy of communism', mainly of the economic etatism and income egalitarianism, on the present situation directly calls for a more concrete analysis of this recent past.

The second unconventional and positive trait of the author's scientific methodology is the obvious fact that he did not become a slave to his own inductive generalisations as well as to the concepts, theories and ideologies formulated by various authorities. Both the data obtained and the conceptual and methodological apparatus taken from world sociology and economy serve him only as instruments in how to arrive at his own interpretations, generalisations and evaluations, by which he reacts to the various facts fixed both by his own research and by other sources. Thus he attains a serious knowledge of the concrete historical reality. In this respect, it is a well-founded sober work, certainly engaged, but exclusively in the sense of a well-intended scientific contribution to the better future of the author's own society.

The third explicit unconventional trait of the monograph is the systematic confrontation of the objectively stated behavioural data, and the subjective attitudes and strategies of the behaviour of the population. (It concerns primarily the economic strategies of households and the evaluation of living standards in public opinion.) It is quite logical that this approach led the author to the analysis of political orientations and preferences. In the chapter devoted to these issues, he used information on political attitudes from January 1996 and the development of political preferences until mid-1996. However, he did not have the opportunity to use later data and thus present more recently developed interpretations corresponding to more significant turns in the attitudes of the Czech population than he presupposed (including their objective reasons, consisting of quite specific developments of social differentiation and mobility, both individual and collective).

A rich and many-sided description of public attitudes demonstrates, on the one hand, that people, though with some delay, tend from the first strongly ideologically influenced orientations to more rational attitudes to social reality. On the other hand, the same description

offers enough material to understand that there exists a certain tension between the objective positions of people and their subjective perceptions. This is traditionally valid for all kinds of self-ranking, in the framework of which the subjective perception very substantially differs from reality. J. Večerník shows this distinctly when analysing the disparities between the objective and subjective indicators of poverty. In this case a group of people always appears who consider themselves to be poor, although this is not true from the point of view of the objective indicators. This perhaps calls for the rethinking of the question of if the 'measuring' of poverty prevailing on the basis of income differentiation adequately shows different aspects of this phenomenon. Another example of the tension between the objective and subjective aspects of social processes is a certain delay in the shifts in political preferences when compared to the real changes in social and economic positions. This phenomenon could be explained as a consequence of the time necessary for acquiring, participating in, and becoming aware of the objective changes.

The author himself points out some other methodological principles applied in the book. In the first place his endeavour to interconnect the micro- and macro-structural approach, in the second, the combination of the analysis on the level of individuals and families, and on that of institutions. We could add to this that, according to his own statement, the view 'from below', that is from the microstructure of individuals and households, is dominant in the study. This means that the macrostructural economic and sociological analysis (e.g. from the point of view of possible various strategies of the economic reform, as well as from the angle considering other possibilities of social stratification and class-structure developments) can be accomplished on the basis of data concerning individuals and households critically analysed. The stress laid on the view 'from below', however, is undoubtedly a clear-cut specific and positive contribution of Večerník's analyses. In no place in the book can one find the naive image of a possibility to put through – without any modifications – the patterns elaborated by elites against the objectively-based social experience of the population.