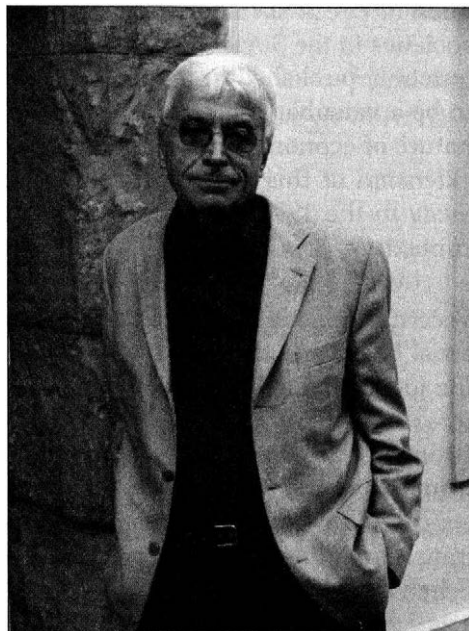


## Jiří Večerník – 65!

Jiří Večerník, founding father of this journal and foremost among the foremost Czech sociologists, has just turned sixty-five. This is an occasion for celebration and reflection. Jiří is one of the few members of his generation who can look back on the results of his work with a sense of satisfaction. To succeed in his generation a person required exceptional tenacity, courage, patience and integrity. His career path reflects the course of the history of Czech society in the second half of the 20th century, and it was no easy history.

Jiří's university years coincided with the period when sociology was deemed a bourgeois pseudo-science and the sociology departments at all Czech universities had been shut down. He did not therefore obtain a systematic university education in the field that he later went on to excel in. It is one of the paradoxes in the history of Czech education that this fact gave him an advantage over those who entered university a few years later, when sociology was re-opened for study. What he would have received then was an education in Marxist-Leninist sociology, something worse than no sociological education at all. He studied economics instead and eventually introduced his strong educational background in this field into sociology. As tends to be the case with remarkable personalities, he turned an unavoidable handicap into his basic competitive advantage.

Jiří Večerník's professional work lies in the field that can broadly be referred to as economic sociology. His very first important research engagement established this as his specialisation: in Pavel Machonin's *Czechoslovak Society* (a research project conducted in 1965–1969), which introduced the empirical approach back into the sociological analysis of social stratification, Jiří wrote the chapter on 'Income and the Living Standard in Social Differentiation' (Pp. 295–321 in P. Machonin et al. *Československá společnost: Sociologická analýza sociální stratifikace*. Bratislava: EPOCHA 1969). This project came forth at a time when a window briefly opened to allow the study of Czech society, and Jiří's first monograph, *Issues of the Sociology of Consumption* (Prague: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences 1971) was the posthumous child of that time. In the long and dull years of normalisation that ensued, which for him meant total marginalisation, Jiří nonetheless managed from the background to influence the content of the Czech Statistical Office's micro-censuses so that the data they produced would be socio-



logically relevant. Using these data he developed analyses of the income differentiation of Czech society and on the basis of comparative analyses of data from other societies in the Soviet block he created comparative studies. This work, which often was only published in mimeo form and never reached the book market, continues to be a valuable and reliable source of information on social stratification and the nature of economic inequality in Czech society in the 1970s and 1980s. The natural extension of this work is Jiří's subsequent involvement in the *Luxembourg Income Study* in the 1990s, crowning his endeavours by putting them in an international context.

When the Czech Republic had re-joined the ranks of open societies, Jiří Večerník became the first editor-in-chief of *Sociologický časopis*. He re-built the editorial board and the entire way in which the journal operates, and he also founded the journal's English edition, *Czech Sociological Review*. In the re-established Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences, he and Petr Matějů together built a strong social stratification department. He was one of the few Czech authors who from the moment the opportunity arose participated in creating a European sociological discourse: in international publications addressing the post-communist transformation of the Eastern block Jiří's name appears most often representing the Czech side. His monograph *Markets and People: The Czech Reform Experience in a Comparative Perspective* (Aldershot: Avebury 1996) has become a standard reference for understanding Czech economic reforms, and *Ten Years of Rebuilding Capitalism: Czech Society after 1989* (Prague: Academia 1999), which he (and Petr Matějů) edited, is probably the most comprehensive analysis of the development of Czech society in the first decade after the revolution. The citation index for Jiří Večerník also reveals how much his work is cited. While sociology and economics are two scientific disciplines that are in a certain sense close, they nonetheless (or perhaps for this very reason) often regard each other with spite. Consequently, it is rare that they agree on a single expert authority. Yet Jiří Večerník has achieved this, as the most cited Czech author in both sociology and economics.

It is the custom on such an occasion as this to say that the person of honour is of course still in fact young (as though youth were a virtue) and will remain so 'for years to come'. In Jiří's case there is no need. There is no skill to being young. And while age is certainly no bed of roses, unless of course we consider the alternative, there is indeed an art to it. And I have never been so sure of anyone as I am of Jiří that it is in art he will master. When I watch how, with knowledge, deliberation and epicurean delight, he appraises the bouquet of a glass of Moravian Riesling, undisturbed by the admiring look of the beautiful woman by his side, and aware that, when it comes to it, the William Davidson Institute in Ann Arbor will be happy to publish another of his analyses in their Working Papers (as that too is among the pleasures of growing older), I realise that we just have to envy him, and I shall gladly toast him with a glass of that Riesling.

Let me wish a long and happy life to this chevalier of *L'Ordre des Palmes Académiques*, and of beautiful women (*Non est gaudium, nisi mulier* is his creed)!

A brilliant sociologist and economist, a lover of classical music, a dazzling pianist, a diligent labourer of science and a much sought-out political-economic commentator, a good friend and an artist of life, etcetera, etcetera. *Skol!*

Ivo Možný

Masaryk University

## Jiří Večerník – The Reluctant Empiricist

Jiří Večerník is one of a handful of great contemporary Czech sociologists. He is an empiricist, a collector and organiser and user of data, mostly numerical, and a very productive and prolific writer. Thanks to Jiří we know an awful lot about Czech society that we would be ignorant of had it not been for his efforts and abilities, in particular about what has happened after 1989. There is more to his work than this, but for me his true legacy will be his contribution to the recording of the Czech transition. History is in the making and Jiří Večerník is there to preserve the memory of it. That is a gift to his nation.

I came to know Jiří when coincidence brought me to Prague in, I think, 1991. The Central European University was establishing a branch there – subsequently to at least my regret disbanded – and I was recruited to lecture on sociology and social policy. It has never been difficult to invite people to Prague and I kept coming two or three times a year. Claire Wallace was in charge and seemed to know everyone. I cannot remember when or how I first met Jiří but it was friendship at first sight. Fortunately I have been able to continue to come to the Czech Republic, including through the hospitality of the Institute of Sociology. I consider my contact and co-operation with Czech sociology colleagues to be one of the most rewarding aspects of my professional, and indeed personal, experience.

Jiří Večerník writes more than others can read. I think I am not wrong to suggest that his two most monumental works, so far, are *Markets and People* (Avebury, Aldershot 1996) and *Ten Years of Rebuilding Capitalism* (Academia, Prague 1999, co-edited with Petr Matějů and co-authored with an impressive collective of Czech sociologists, demographers and economists).

The question that is pursued in both of these books, and in much of Jiří's work otherwise, is this: what kind of society has the Czech Republic turned into after its most recent revolution, that of 1989? There are two possible hypotheses. The first one looks back to the grounding experiences in the Czech lands of relatively early industrialisation leading on to twenty years of vibrant co-habitation between capitalism and democracy after the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, and including the short resurrection of that co-habitation after the Second World War. When com-

munism fell in 1989, this grounding experience was within living memory (as it was not in most countries within the then Soviet block) and was present in the national awareness as an idea of what kind of society this 'really' is. According to this view, the forty years of authoritarianism was only a temporary setback which the Czechs would easily shrug off so that they could get back on their 'natural' course of development. The Czech Republic, then, would rapidly be re-established as a normal European country.

The other hypothesis would stress the shortness of the democracy-capitalism co-habitation and the profound impact in society, including in attitudes, mentalities and culture, of life under communist authoritarianism, in particular the ruthlessly totalitarian Czech version. According to this view the dominant experience would be that from 1948 and onwards, an experience that would crowd out the memory of happier but more distant days. The Czechs would have to work hard and long for their 'normalisation' and the remains of totalitarianism would sit in their society for a long time.

Jiří and I have discussed these two hypotheses as long as we have known each other. In discussions he tends to lean towards the second view but I have not been fully persuaded that his own evidence is unambiguously in support of that pessimism. It is probably true that an authoritarian legacy lingers in some ways in popular attitudes and expectations but also that this is largely a generational influence that is dying out rapidly. There may be a certain immaturity in the Czech political-democratic culture, but that is matched by a mature understanding of seeking that culture to be improved by the binding commitments of membership in the European Union. On these matters Jiří writes more carefully than he speaks when he summarises the lessons of his research. As a reluctant empiricist he guards carefully against reading simple truths out of even the most detailed statistics.

As usual, it is too early to tell. Jiří's contribution is a determined insistence that these matters should be judged and analysed empirically and 'from below', from the life experiences of ordinary people. For his part, he has not only insisted on how it should be done, he has also done it, and done it with great flair. No doubt, more is to come.

I want to mention one other contribution: his editorship of the English language editions of the *Czech Sociological Review*. That is a heroic enterprise. It is successful because of Jiří's relentless hard work, both to get others to contribute and to contribute himself. It is an achievement that Czech sociology can publish six issues a year of their review, two of them in English. I don't know if they – the Czech sociologists – are fully aware of the value of that resource. The English language editions may not be viable without the determination and energy that editor Večerník is able and willing to put into it, but that will not last forever. I think it may now be time – and I take this opportunity to put a challenge to Jiří and his colleagues – to sit down and think ahead about how to best safeguard a unique tradition.

Stein Ringen  
Oxford University

## Jiří Večerník and the Luxembourg Income Study: Teaching Us about the Transition of the Czech Republic in a Comparative Perspective

Jiří Večerník appeared at one of the initial meetings of the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) Ford Foundation Project on the economic and social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in 1991. This transformation, termed by Barbara Torrey 'the most important social experiment of the 20th century', was to be examined by the LIS project associates using quantitative household income micro data on changing incomes and living standards and on their distribution in the former Soviet block nations of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Russia.

At this meeting we met many transition scholars – some of whom were in the western mode, like Petr Matějů and Endré Sik; and others who were working based on the background, training, and customs of the soviet block. We met a Czech sociologist and a researcher who was head of the Socio-Economics Department at the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, the editor of the *Czech Sociological Review*, and a scholar who we found to be a thoughtful and articulate spokesman of the transition. Above all, his stories and theories made good sense and were spoken in careful yet passionate English! His name was, of course, Jiří Večerník.

Like us, he had published work in the field of the labour markets, economic inequality and social policy. But unlike us, he knew about the ways in which the regime system in the Czech Republic had so twisted salaries and other labour market rewards that the police and military were paid more than physicians, lawyers, scientists and of course academics.

Indeed, Jiří was a gracious and eager student of LIS and immediately put his ideas to work to show how the new market freedoms were changing the labour market reward structure and also leaving many behind. His LIS research (e.g. Večerník 1995, 1999) showed his readers how situations were changing in his native land compared to other countries. This work later was expanded into two major books and other outcome.

We could find no better example of the type of scholar we could work with in the countries we were studying, and so not only did we make Jiří the Czech country coordinator for LIS, but also, by vote of the LIS member countries, Jiří was elected a member of the Executive Committee of the Luxembourg Income Study.

On this, his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, we would like to congratulate Jiří on all he has contributed to our collective understanding of social and economic policy and human outcomes in the Czech Republic and the CEE more generally.

*Tim Smeeding and Lee Rainwater*  
Luxembourg Income Study

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