

The Advantage of Disadvantage: Jiří Musil and Urban Sociology

I first met Jiří Musil in the spring of 1989 when we were both teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York. Intrigued by his lectures, by the photos of Prague, and by discussions of inter-war and socialist Prague we began what was to be a friendship and collegial relationship that included several co-authored articles.

During that spring of 1989 in New York, Jiří said of himself that he was being 'let out' for the last time before being retired. This, of course, did not happen; the world changed with the Velvet Revolution in the fall and Jiří went on to a long, illustrious career, becoming the first director of the reconstituted Institute of Sociology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, a founding member of the Central European University in Prague, a member of the Centre for Social and Economic Strategies at Charles University, President of the European Sociological Association. The list goes on.

Yet Jiří never stopped researching and writing, whether about urban and regional issues, society, or politics. He was the best of intellectuals, broadly educated, multi-lingual, perennially curious, not easily satisfied. He was a man of 'many qualities', to use the words of another Musil. Among those qualities, he was a lover and historian of Prague, a great promoter of his city. I remember the many walks through the streets of Prague, the trips to outlying cities, to his beloved country house, listening to Jiří read the stones.

As an urbanist from the world of 'really existing socialism', who had been trained in a pre-war sociological tradition that included the Chicago School, Jiří had much to contribute to urban theory and practice. In 1970 he was one of the founding members of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee 21, which sought to reconstitute urban sociology, to create a New Urban Sociology. At that time, however, he felt that east/west divisions constituted a kind of 'system centrism', making certain views unpopular and making it difficult to be heard. Jiří wrote:

It seems that neo-Weberianism explained more adequately the urban social processes in socialist countries than in Western societies. And on the contrary, the strength of neo-Marxism in Western urban sociology indicates that in societies with dominant position of the market and market engendered social effects, different versions of Marxist economic interpretations of urbanism became attractive. [Musil 2004]

The net result was that the pervasive Marxist bias of Western intellectuals kept the New Urban Sociology from systematically analysing cities in former socialist countries.

As the leading Czech urban sociologist with a previously established international network, Jiří necessarily took on many roles after 1989; in his own words—there was ‘so much to make up for’. At the same time, he did not lose sight of the project he had outlined early on—to enrich urban theory and practice through a comparison of socialist and market urbanisation.

Looking over Jiří Musil’s writings in English, I will focus on his contributions to a stronger, revitalised urban sociology, a project which is still on the drawing boards.

Although it is a commonplace to note the misfortune of having lived at a time and in a place that underwent great disruption—Prague, as Jiří noted, experienced ‘seven different political and economic orders’ in the 20th century and went through two socio-economic experiments—from capitalism to socialism and back to capitalism—there was an upside to this for the urban scholar. Taken as a whole, he felt that the historical trajectory constituted a ‘unique social experiment’, a ‘living laboratory’ where ‘theories of contemporary urban sociology could be better empirically tested . . . and the analyses of urban development could considerably contribute to the advancement of the discipline’ [Musil 2004].

At the heart of this project is the comparative approach, both longitudinal and cross-cultural. This fit with Jiří’s Weberian leanings as well as his human ecology, his formative academic leave in Scotland in the 1960s, and publication in a book edited by Ray Pahl [1968] featuring international contributions. Writing in 2004, and looking back upon Czech urban sociology during socialism, Musil notes that many Czech studies of urbanisation carried out for planning purposes, ‘implicitly examined a political question: to what extent urbanization under socialism differs from similar processes in market economy societies’ [Musil 2004]. A 1983 article, with Zdeněk Ryšavý, explicitly compares Czech urban and regional processes under capitalism and socialism [Musil and Ryšavý 1983]. In a paper written while on leave at the New School for Social Research in 1989, he suggests that a comparative approach would contribute to the discussion of the urban sociological paradigm.

First of all, systematic comparison of East Central Europe could make an empirical contribution to this debate: a description of similarities and differences over the forty-year period, both during socialism and post-socialism. Jiří did this in a number of papers. Writing in 2006 he concluded that the research confirmed the thesis of the New Urban Sociology of the 1960s—that urban processes are for the most part dependent on ‘global societies and their changes’. But the picture was *more* rather than less complex; at the same time, he argued, ‘general features’ such as the internal differentiation of socio-spatial structures could be found in cities in different societies indicating their relative independence. Yet, the specifics of how they were shaped depended on particular actors and the rules of the game. In a word, although the divisions differed, both market and socialist regulation resulted in ‘socio-spatial divisions of cities and in spatial distance between social groups’ [Musil 2006: 267–268].

Jiří clearly underlined the significance of this comparative study for urban sociology:

The comparative studies of capitalist and socialist cities proved convincingly that the study of socio-spatial inequalities and of their causes remains one of the main and specific tasks of urban sociology. The understanding of the interaction between space and society in this urban dimension can be legitimately considered one of the cores of urban theory. [Musil 2006: 268]

Jiří welcomed the more recent diverse trends towards what he called a 'pluralistic urban sociology' [Musil 2004]. He wrote:

If the 'old urban sociology' faced the danger of paying too much attention to internal structures of cities, the 'new urban sociology' and the neo-Marxist schools, which arose out of them, face the opposite danger. They are so concentrated on explaining the transformation of cities by linking them to macro-economic processes in nation states or to global forces, that they changed urban sociology into a kind of institutional economy analysis of cities. This is the Achilles heel of these schools. Their one-sidedness.

In this view, urban theory had reached the limits of mono-causal reductionism:

the city was conceived mainly as a product, a dependent variable The interest in discovering new elements in the city declined . . . the city began to 'dissolve' in the society. In a fully urbanized society—according to this view—urban sociology equals general sociology. The disappearance of space was one of the important effects of this approach. [Musil 2004]

Jiří credits the 'cultural turn', specifically the 'rediscovery of place', to the turnabout that began during the last two decades and he wrote: '[t]he city started again to be understood as a community linked to a concrete space and not only to national and global society'. Once this happened, 'cities stopped to be "dissolved" in society' [Musil 2006: 268].

Cities also began to be seen as having agency, as affecting society. Writing about Prague, Jiří noted that the identity of the city, based on its cultural heritage, was one of the important elements that allowed Prague to persist over the disruptive forty-year period [Musil 2006].

Finally, Jiří recognised the import of the new types of urban time-space structures that accompanied globalisation. He referred to globalisation as a second revolution, experienced simultaneously with the transition from a planned to a market economy, and which was associated with, among other things, both tourism and cosmopolitanism. Tourism was a vantage point from which to ex-

amine this process which not only added to other internal urban divisions, but increased polarisation regionally, further separating Prague from the rest of the country [Hoffman and Musil 1999, 2009].

In answer to those who have argued that urban theory has failed, Jiří has given us comparative analyses of cities under socialism and capitalism. He has also given us an astute analysis of 20th-century urban theory and urban sociology that shows the importance of positionality—the relation between urban reality and theory.

During his last year, speaking of what counts at the end, Jiří told me that it is knowledge and love. He had both.

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