

## A Singular Contribution

I know a little about Jiří Musil through his close connection to Ernest Gellner, about whose life and work I have written (*Ernest Gellner: An Intellectual Biography*, Verso, London, 2010), and it may be useful to begin there, before turning to two memories of my own.

They had a good deal in common: their background was in the Jewish community, though this was less a matter of positive allegiance than of impositions placed upon them. Gellner had escaped in 1939, although he returned for six months in 1945–1946. Musil had stayed, ending up in the camps. On his return to Prague he went to see the home of the woman with whom he had been in love, certain that she was dead as she had been sent to Terezín. She had survived, and suddenly opened the window at which he was staring. They married, and she became a distinguished French translator.

Musil was one of Gellner's key sources in the latter's attempt to understand the nature of actually existing socialism. They first met in the 1960s: Musil felt this was in 1964 or 1965 but Gellner's passport only has a stamp for 1967.

In their first meetings it seems that Gellner was seeking signs of liberalisation; Musil felt that he was doing so, so to speak, too eagerly, prone to underestimate the difficulties of life under communism. Still, they remained very close at this time. After the Soviet invasion, Musil was named in the White Book, and so left to become, with Gellner's help, a reader in sociology at the London School of Economics. He taught 'socialist societies' as part of the department's major course on the sociology of development. There were tensions in the department, with Musil once having a public row with Robin Blackburn, the Marxist sociologist in the department, who was to lose his job in the school shortly afterwards. Gellner suggested at this time that Musil write a book on 'sociology after revolution'. The book was completed, but it was never published, as Musil returned to Prague. Gellner used to say that it is very hard to leave Bohemia, but he felt nonetheless that Musil's freedom of expression was cramped thereafter—although he admired the way in which Musil was able to continue to work, through specialising in urban sociology, a technical, non-politicised subject. Gellner thereafter saw him on several occasions before 1989, and wrote a celebrated piece—'A biologist in Vodkobuzia' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 23 November 1979)—which features, albeit in disguise, Musil's house in the south of Bohemia. The internal courtyard symbolised for Gellner society's turning away from the state. Musil recognised the portrait, but so too, to Gellner's amusement, did many others.

My own first memory concerns the period when Musil became the director of the Institute of Sociology, either in 1989 or 1990. I spent several weeks in Prague in early 1990, and was and remain deeply indebted to the amount of time he gave to me, and to the introductions he made for me. He had clean hands, and

was totally concerned to do everything he could to create a new society, above all to explain Czechoslovakia to the West and to warn his fellow citizens that not everything would be easy. At this time he wrote a superb article on the different political economies of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as part of the explanation of the Velvet Divorce, so he certainly fulfilled part of his mandate. But he was taken away, at least to some extent, from the second task by becoming the academic director of the Prague College of the Central European University, which had campuses in Prague, Warsaw and Budapest.

The Prague campus owed everything to Musil. In 1989 he had asked Ray Pahl and Gellner to come to a workshop on the future of Czechoslovakia, and these two came to form with Musil the core of the teaching staff in Prague. This is where I have a second memory, or perhaps a set of memories. The very early years of the Central European University were extraordinary. Students came from the whole region, encountered each other as much as they did new ways of thinking, thereby creating a fabulous and wholly fertile opening of minds and possibilities. Musil did not direct this in any way, but he provided a calm and courteous frame within which huge amounts of human capital were restored or created. Of course, this early period of opening came to an end, as was predictable given tensions between George Soros and Václav Klaus and the likelihood that the different nation-states would reclaim their own education systems. But it was a glorious moment, and Musil certainly played a vital role in allowing it to happen.

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