
Sociology and Historical Change: The Case of the Post-Communist Transformation in Europe

Two incentives of a decisive nature initiated the realisation of the present issue of the Czech Sociological Review. The first was an event of general significance: the challenge of the President of the International Sociological Association, Professor Immanuel Wallerstein, inspired by the legacy of Émile Durkheim, to join the forces of sociology and history for a deeper understanding of social change. The second was a seemingly fortuitous incident which happened during a discussion between Czech sociologists. One of the participants known for his fidelity to the principles of the neo-positivist methodology formulated a little bit of an exaggerated demand, that only fully identical variables should be used for the reason of historical comparison of the stratification surveys' results. The acceptance of this practically unreachable requirement (applicable, perhaps, only to quite simple comparisons of the results of pre-planned repeated surveys) would have devaluated the existing extensive data basis describing the historical fates of Czech and Slovak societies. This requirement was expressed when precisely quite the opposite was urgently needed: namely a systematic reconstruction of the societal changes at least in the last thirty years. Without it no serious analysis of the recent course of the post-Communist transformation could be produced.

The need for sociological analysis of Czech, or eventually Czechoslovak, society in the historical perspective appeared with this urgency for the second time. After the imposed 'transition from capitalism to socialism' during the 1950s, the victory of state socialist social system was declared by the authorities. In 1967, data for the first representative survey on social stratification and mobility in Czechoslovakia and one of the first in any state socialist society were collected with the intention to describe and to analyse the new social order. The interpretation of the data took place in the atmosphere of the reform attempt known as the 1968 Prague Spring. The main conclusion drawn from the analysis was the stated position of Czechoslovakia standing then at a historical crossroad of possibilities between either the comeback of bureaucratic and egalitarian system of the 1950s, or a new development leading to a democratic society of achievement. On this basis, a programme of cooperation of sociological and historiographical research was formulated, concerning both the past and current changes.

The brutal intervention of the Warsaw Pact military forces rendered the fulfilment of this programme impossible. The following twenty 'normalisation' years were later quite rightly characterised by the art-historians as the period, when 'times stood still'. While historical changes of major significance – above all the developments towards a modern post-industrial society – occurred in many other countries, in Czechoslovakia and other European state socialist countries only some preliminary conditions for future changes accumulated 'in the womb' of a rigid social structure – all this with the inevitable consequence of stagnation on the cultural and civilisational level of quality of societal life.

After the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989, the time of rapid and substantial institutional, political and, to some extent also social shifts came. In the course of several fol-

lowing years another 'transition' was accomplished: democratisation, privatisation and liberalisation brought a newly shaped social differentiation. In principle, a new institutional distribution of power, wealth and incomes, with some consequences for the differentiation on life-styles emerged. However, after the dissociation of Federal Czechoslovakia and the three-years' existence of the sovereign Czech state, it came to light, that this 'transition', in spite of its radical character, only has brought the country to a new historical crossroad. There are two offers now: the choice is to be made between either a way leading to a real modernisation in quality of life and the desired 'return to Europe', based, of course, on the application of the 'meritocratic' principles of achievement; or a continuation of the stagnation based on the strange and surviving combination of the inherited egalitarianism with a mixture of state and private ownership, liberalism and state interventionism, class structure and social stratification – all this without any actual substantial changes towards modern society. A new period of societal transformation, of historical change could begin at this very moment equally as a new stagnation could follow.

It is quite clear from this, how important the historical approach to societal reality is not only to us but to other state socialist countries as well. For this reason, it is no wonder, that our reactions to the two above mentioned incentives was: to collect as much serious contributions as possible that could present various ways how to grasp the historical aspects of societal phenomena and to publish them in a special issue of the *Czech Sociological Review*. We addressed many scholars known for their successful achievements or, at least, attempts in this field, focusing both on sociology as such, and kindred disciplines to join their forces in a common endeavour to reveal both the unique facts and, as far as possible, some more general regularities of historical change.

Gerhard Lenski, an outstanding American scholar and author of many original ideas in the field of social stratification, already so helpful to us in the 1960s, offers in his paper a new version of 'grand theories' aiming to a general scheme of socio-cultural evolution, getting over the biases of the older ones. We appreciate his application of this theory to the case of the post-Communist transformation in Europe, stating that its conclusions focus on the same issues which we consider to be important on the basis of our concrete analyses.

Prof. J. Krejčí, a Czech scholar, living and working in the United Kingdom for years, and a man of great experience in many fields of social sciences and humanities, here offers another approach to history: developing a general socio-cultural theory using for this reason an empirically based typological comparison of significant structural changes in various countries and historical situations.

M. Illner contributed with a paper analysing systematically the stage of development of the sociological endeavour to analyse and generalise the experience of the post-Communist societal transformation in Europe. He comes not only with a survey of the existing approaches, but draws the developments from the first 'transition' theories formulated at the beginning of the 1990s to the later 'transformation' analyses and attempts to create a theory in this field, thus showing the prospects of a promising further development of sociological research.

P. Machonin advances an analysis of the mutual relationships of social transformation and modernisation based on the historical experience of the Czech Republic under state socialism and in the present situation with an outlook into the possible future.

The Czech society regarding its past characterised by a high level of industrial, cultural and political development, is a good example to show the antimodernisation effects of the state socialist social system and the difficulties met on the way to a new phase of modernisation.

The following empirically based studies demonstrate two possibilities of coping with the difficulties of empirical analysis of historical changes by sociological instruments. P. Nieuwbeerta and S. Rijken from the Netherlands publish a paper based on cross-national comparisons of inter-generational mobility in East-Central and East-European countries. Their analysis of the very important phenomenon of educational expansion in these countries and of its relationship to the state socialist social system is fascinating as is J. Večerník's analysis of a long series of historically comparable data concerning the earnings distribution in Czech society from the period of the second world war to the present. Here he presents a clear-cut example of his famous exact analyses revealing the inhibitive role of the state socialist egalitarianism and its still vivid legacy, a phenomenon, so often neglected in many Western studies on state socialism.

From the disciplines kindred with sociology and systematically cooperating with it, we have intentionally devoted a great deal of space to historians, or better to those who for years were engaged in 'social historiography'. L. Kalinová, who presents here an original short depiction of the social history of state socialism in Czechoslovakia led, towards the end of the 1960s, a team of historians who tried to create a historiographical pendant to the sociological analysis of social stratification and mobility. At present, she systematically continues this work with publications concerning the whole period of state socialism. O. Felcman and D. Musilová were so kind as to do the inevitable hard work and prepared a survey of nearly all – both more and less successful – attempts of the Czech and Slovak historians and sociologists to analyse the socio-historical changes which led to the instalment of the state socialist system and attended its existence until its final collapse. M. Bárta contributes with a sketch of a concrete example of a not wholly successful attempt of historians and sociologists' cooperation, concerning the 1968 'Prague Spring' events. He shows quite plastically many existing obstacles hindering the interdisciplinary endeavour.

Pavel Machonin

