**Ivo Možný:** ***Česká společnost: nejdůležitější fakta o kvalitě našeho života (Czech Society: The Most Important Facts about the Quality of Our Life)***
Praha, Portál 2002, 206 p.

Since the revolutions of 1989, there have been countless analyses of the changes taking place in Eastern Europe. Particular attention has naturally focused on the development of democracy and capitalism, surely two of the most significant changes from the old regime. Less attention, however, has been devoted to way that everyday life has changed for citizens of the region.

Ivo Možný's *Czech Society: The Most Important Facts about the Quality of Our Life* tries to fill this gap. The work gathers statistical data on Czech life in areas such as family, health, leisure, and criminality and presents it in a reader friendly format. Except for brief introductory essays, the book mainly consists of graphs and tabloid-style factoids. Možný chose this style, he tells us, in an effort to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about Czech society. In this review, I take Možný at his word and ask the question: Was 1989 a watershed for the Czech people?

Even if a future demographer did not know what happened politically in 1989, it would not be hard for him to deduce that some earth-shattering event took place. In the ten years since the revolution, childbirths dropped by one-third, teenage marriages fell dramatically (in 1990 19% of brides were 19 or younger - among the highest percentages in Europe - today just 2% are that young), abortions plummeted, and the number of children born out of wedlock tripled.

These trends appear to be caused on the one hand by new opportunities (young people can now travel, start their own businesses, and have easier access to contraception) and on the other by state policies (single mothers receive higher social benefits than married couples). Možný even speculates that people value their own lives more highly today than they used to. Consider, for example, that the frequency of accidents and injuries has dropped by one-third.

By far the most dramatic changes are in environmental quality. Just about every indicator of quality has spiked. Nitrous oxides are 42% of their 1989 level, sulfur oxides 14%, and particulates just 10%. Air quality has improved in just about every town where it is measured and heavy metal emissions are down 40%. Natural waterways have become substantially cleaner and species of fish decimated under communism have returned to the country's rivers and streams. This is not to say that the Czech Republic does not still have work ahead of it - the rise in car use is especially disturbing - but the progress made in cleaning up smokestacks and treating waste water deserves notice.

Možný also overturns a number of myths about the baleful consequences of the transition. Throughout the 1990s, commentators lamented the death of Czech culture as state funding dried up and American imports overwhelmed the airwaves. Yet, these predictions were not fulfilled. There are more theatres and twice as many performances as there were in 1989. Czechs are still among the most devoted readers in Europe and they now have more than three times as many titles to choose from. While some worry about quality, Možný interestingly compares a newspaper from 1989 (8 pages, 1.5 pages of advertisements) with the same paper in 1999 (56 pages, 21 pages of advertisements). There are even twice as many museums - it would be interesting to know what kind, one would have expected there to be fewer - as under the old regime.

On other measures, 1989 is not so much a turning point as an extension (though at a faster rate) of previous trends. Life expectancy has increased dramatically (men today live about four years longer on average) and suicides have dropped. What makes these two indicators particularly interesting is that among post-communist countries they are unique to the Czech Republic. In every other transforming country life expectancy has dropped and suicides have increased.

There are of course areas of either stagnation or negative trends. As a former university dean, Možný devotes considerable attention to the educational system, especially in terms of how it compares to other countries. Among OECD members the Czech Republic is among

the worst off (down with Mexico and Turkey and even behind Hungary and Poland) with regard to the chances of being admitted to a university and the average number of years of university education completed.

As Možný points out, the legacy of the Czechs' brutal normalisation regime of the 1970s and 1980s weighs heavy on the country's system of higher education. The communist-era emphasis on technical and agricultural education has remained even as students prefer a Western-style liberal-arts education. Paradoxically, though the government has been reluctant to devote resources to education (it remains the only OECD country where teachers have wages below the national average), Czech students continue to perform extremely well in international comparisons.

If education is an area of stagnation, then criminality is by far the most negative trend. While the twenty years before 1989 saw approximately 100,000 crimes reported annually, by 1993 the number had jumped to 400,000, while the percentage of cases solved dropped from 77% to 44%. Moreover, deterrence does not seem to be working. Like most of the countries of Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic imprisons two to three times more of its citizens than a typical Western European country. (Možný misleadingly reports that the number of prisoners rose by 180% between 1990 and 1999, while neglecting to mention that the country's jails were virtually emptied by a general amnesty in 1990. According to his own graph there are fewer prisoners today than in 1987.)

*Česká společnost* provides a useful picture of what has happened in the Czech Republic since 1989, as well as interesting comparisons with the rest of the world. Možný has a talent for interesting and revealing factoids. (His biography tells us that he has worked as a radio commentator.) The range of subjects is broad, though there are some areas where Možný could have captured additional turning points in Czech lifestyles. Changes in consumption (e.g. shopping and eating habits) and travel - for many the most important benefits - would attest to the 'revolutionary' impact of 1989.

The book's style makes it an appealing companion for the general public, journalists, and even to students looking for research topics. Scholars, however, will probably miss a deeper analysis of the problems covered. One particularly wants to know how Možný would explain Czech 'exceptionalism': why Czechs managed to avoid some of the more fatal consequences of transition. Was it its lower unemployment rate that made life better for Czechs than for its neighbours, or was some other factor at work?

As for Czech society itself, the book provides eloquent testimony to the ground that has been covered in the last ten years. If we judge a society by the degree to which people are both free to make their own choices and have a wide set of options to choose from, Czech society today is incomparably better than it was in 1989. And it is so, even if these choices are to have fewer babies, marry less, or commit more crimes. On this score Czechs have voted with their feet. From being a land of emigration the Czech Republic has become a land of immigration. For the first time in living memory, more Czechs - not just foreigners - are choosing to return to the country than leave.

*Andrew Roberts*

**Peter Skalník (ed.):** ***The Transition to Democracy. The Czech Republic and South Africa Compared***
Praha, Set Out 1999, 92 p.

Between the Czech Republic and South Africa there exist vast differences - in geography, history, population, industrialisation, the system of government, the economy and the development of civil rights. Therefore, the idea of a comparison of the Czech Republic and South Africa would appear to be a courageous undertaking. The authors of the book - Peter Skalník, Jan K. Coetzee, Otakar Hulec, Vishnu Padayachee and Luboš Kropáček - agree that it is perhaps an unusual exercise to make a number of fairly detailed comparisons between the Czech Republic and South Africa. However, they find this unusual comparison attractive to many people these days.