

**Jiří Večerník: CZECH SOCIETY
IN THE 2000s: A REPORT ON
SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICIES
AND STRUCTURES.**

Prague, Academia, 2009. 286 pp.

In most European countries social reports are published with awesome regularity. To wit: the oldest among them, the British *Social Trends*, will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year. Germany has its *Datenreports*, France *Données Sociales*, Spain *Barómetro Social de España*, and Hungary (since 1998) – *Social Reports*. Nothing comparable to these, however, exists in the Czech Republic. What comes closest to them is the extensive research by the country's leading sociologist Jiří Večerník, whose *Markets and People: The Czech Reform Experience in a Comparative Perspective* (Avebury) appeared in 1996 and the edited volume *Ten Years of Re-building Capitalism. Czech Society after 1989* (Academia) three years later.

Czech Society in the 2000s is Večerník's third contribution to closing this embarrassing intellectual lacuna. The text is articulated into twelve chapters assembled in four sections – socio-economic policies, inequalities, structures, and values – and it offers a wealth of relevant data about contemporary Czech society. Its sequencing deliberately does not follow any accepted academic model. For, as the author emphasizes, the virtual infinity of mutual connections between dynamic social history and stratified social structure makes it futile to ascribe a privileged position to any among the welter of particular theoretical perspectives.

The book aims at providing a comprehensive portrait of Czech society substantiated by statistical and sociological surveys as well as by numerous other sources, and strives to pin down the systemic changes underlying quantitative fluctuations. It is required reading for anybody seeking information about the socio-economic development of Czech society over the last twenty years in terms of employment, social policies, economic inequalities, social structures (with special regard to the situation of the middle class, retirees, and the poor), and issues related to the value of work, consumption and welfare.

The first section of the book discusses social policies in three broad areas: the labor market, the welfare system and social inclusion, with a focus on the implementation of EU policies. Each chapter presents basic statistical and sociological data and concludes by sketching challenges in the offing – the problems of work commitment and stimuli to boost labor motivation, the feasibility of further reforms in welfare, and the importance of a functional framework – an inclusive middle-class society – for the successful social integration of marginalized groups.

Disparities in earnings, inequalities in household incomes and redistributive processes implemented by the state through taxes and social benefits are the subjects of the second section. It illustrates well how the system of work-reward has fundamentally changed since 1989 and it identifies the sources of this change. While in the *Ancien Régime* gender and seniority were decisive factors in determining one's income level, now edu-

cation is the primary determinant. This section surveys in detail tax and benefits reform, calculating how the new system contributes to income inequality. And, finally, it also examines public opinion on taxes and benefits.

The book's third section turns to social structures and examines them from three perspectives. The optics of social stratification is applied to the middle class. A socio-political standpoint serves to elucidate the condition of retirees and the intricacies of pension reform. The latter is a particularly contentious issue not only because the Czech population is aging fast but also because of the obvious implausibility of sustaining a pay-as-you-go pension system while maintaining at least some equivalence between past earnings and current pension benefits. The section concludes with a chapter cast in terms of economic disparities that deals with the poor, the different ways of measuring poverty and some causes of this condition (unemployment, single parent family, number of children, etc).

The final section broaches the sphere of socio-economic values and examines it through a multiple cognitive lens. It describes how work values and job attitudes have evolved over the past decade and portrays the rapid expansion of a consumer society together with the profound impact it is exerting on the values and the behavior of individuals and groups. But consumerism is not, the section suggests, the only force unraveling the fabric of local economic culture. Opening to the world beyond, the section culminates in canvassing "European values" and it ponders the potential consequences of their collision

with the contemporary Czech economy and society.

As is to be expected in such a rich and complex work the individual chapters vary in their compositions, each presenting different ratios of methodological reflections, empirical data, and their interpretations. Anybody familiar with Večerník's scholarly output might detect in some segments of his new book traces of previously published articles. The text is also not entirely proportional in balancing the author's critical attitude toward past developments with his forward outlook. But leaving these petty complaints aside, *Czech Society in the 2000s* is a signal contribution to our understanding of contemporary Czech society and a handy instrument for all foreign students and researchers who might face difficulties in accessing on their own the data Večerník's book presents. It is an indispensable volume for any library concerned with Czech studies.

Peter Steiner

**Michaela Ferencová –
Jana Nosková: PAMĚŤ
MĚSTA. OBRAZ MĚSTA,
VEŘEJNÉ KOMEMORACE
A HISTORICKÉ ZLOMY
V 19.–21. STOLETÍ.**

**[Memory of a City. Image of
a City. Public Commemoration
and Historic Turn of the 21st
Century.]**

Brno: Etnologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky, v.v.i.,
pracoviště Brno, Statutární město
Brno, Archiv města Brna, 2009,
407 pp.