

Petr Sak – Karolína Saková: Youth at the Crossroads. Sociological Analysis of Status of Young People in Society and Their Role in the Processes of Europeisation and Informatisation

Svoboda-Servis, Praha 2004, 240 p.

This publication draws on author's earlier book *The Metamorphoses of Czech Youth*. (2000) P. Sak was since 2000 able to carry out two conceptually linked long-term research tasks which he concluded by publishing final reports in 2002 and 2003 and which were sponsored by grants from Ministry of Education (*Young Generation at the Beginning of the Integration of the Czech Society into European Structures*) and Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (*Informatisation of the Czech Society in the Context of Globalisation and European Integration*).

Conceptual framework linking both publications is represented by social maturing (F. Kahuda) and social field (P. Sak). Both are used by the author in an inspiring way, convincing us of their effectiveness – particularly if youth sociology is to cope with processes of europeisation and informatisation. These too are the areas which are beginning to play a dominant role in the lives of young people. They even prevail over all other traditional problems of adolescents as we know them from past youth survey results.

P. Sak reminds us of the fact that traditional handbooks and textbooks on young generation, their education or socialisation, based solely on older sources or surveys are no longer of practical use when working today's youth and have become part of collection of historical resources on young generations.

The book presents above all new sociological information on the young generation of today, which had been processed by the author in cooperation with K. Saková, fresh graduate of master studies in sociology who has worked on several international projects. In a separate chapter P. Sak presents his own socio-political interpretation of key transformations of Czech society.

The main goal of the publication is to sociologically characterise young generation at the beginning of the process of integration of Czech society into European structures, the establishment of European identity and the formation of an information society. As P. Sak stresses, this young generation has „...the opportunity to enrich the newly forming Europeanism with unique Czech values and develop them in the wider framework of possibilities of European culture and society“. (p. 8) The first chapter is dedicated to value orientation. Comparing the results of empirical survey from 1993, 1997, 2000 and 2002, we are able to confirm that youth is moving towards liberalism, hedonism, egoism and preference of material values. To use the language of sociological indicators, personal career and success begins to prevail over interpersonal relationships, efforts to enjoy life take over from the struggle for self-realisation and self-improvement. Economic development is preferred even at the expense of protection of the environment. Drugs are considered to be something that belongs to modern society rather than a threat to it.

Naturally, the question arises as to what extent this trend is in line with the processes brought by europeisation. Author operationalises this phenomenon as a result of real connection with European reality. He has constructed an index of europeisation based on 19 indicators (the use of electronic mail, knowledge of foreign languages, work experience abroad, contacts with foreigners). Results confirm that together with the rise of europeisation index higher importance is being attached to values of environment, responsibility for oneself as well as for others, quality of life, security, self-improvement, spiritual and mental stimuli, personality development, interpersonal relationships etc.

The author comes to the conclusion that with rise in the europeisation index comes a rise in „...a group shift from the development of value orientation of Czech society in the 1990s“. (p. 20) At the same time he assumes that at the same pace as the europeisation of Czech society will develop „...the post-material value orientation of Czech society will be strengthened“. (s. 21)

Similarly, P. Sak has constructed an index of computerisation (with indicators such as number of hours spent on the Internet, use of e-mail, possession of a PC and its use). In this case the results are not that clear and far from positive. “Computer fundamentalists” prefer career, have an open attitude towards drugs, suppress the values of family and children. However, even within them there is a proportion of young people who have managed to include information technology in their lifestyle without becoming dependent on it.

This has inspired us to give some more thoughts to the effect of europeisation on value orientation of 19 to 23-year-olds with regard to post-modern values, and to point out their ambiguity and existence of certain limits. “First of all we know, that these young people (particularly university students and graduates) are going through a specific phase of their spiritual and personal development. Other research results also confirm that the specific features of value orientation are facilitated by the perspective of “great” future in the new united Europe, which “expectations” are verbalised in situations of lack of necessary experience and refusal to take on full social responsibility for oneself and his/her family. After all we do not doubt that what we see here is the reservoir of middle classes of the future with their typical shift from material to post-material values, as in the theory of R. Inglehart.

Next chapter is a presentation of tendencies in attitudes towards national, ethnic (Roma) and religious or marginal (skinheads, punks, anarchists) groups. In the context of Czech identity the changes in popularity of

important personae as well as critical moments of Czech history are explained. Czech patriotism is illustrated in the context of European integration, foreign language skills of young people are examined.

Empirical data confirm that attitude of Czechs towards Slovaks has not only become more positive, but traditionally belongs to the best among examined nations (the French, Americans, Germans, Russians). Similar shift has been observed when assessing a critical point in modern history – the partition of Czechoslovakia. Interestingly, this change is reflected with respect to “depletion of Czech cultural life”. In 1992, only 25-30% expected this would be a consequence of the partition, in 2001 50% of all respondents agreed that it had in fact been the case.

Following chapters include results of surveys on free time, leadership participation, drug abuse, media. Two chapters deserve particular attention: one about the Internet and computers, another on the “digitalisation of living field” – because new information and communication technologies are an attribute of today’s young generation and it is virtually impossible to compare their influence today with the effects on former generations. A new phenomenon for research emerges, and youth sociology nowadays needs to cope with it. If it fails, this will result in lack of data necessary for future comparisons and deeper analyses. P. Sak and K. Saková prove the computerisation of society with the help of data collected between 1992 and 2002 in a wide range – availability of PC, Internet access, connection time, e-mail, chat – which allows them to observe the shift from use of PC to write texts or play games towards extensive use of the Internet and e-mail. When comparing countries, Czech republic and Slovakia beat Poland and Hungary but lag behind Estonia and Slovenia. This gap will widen after the EU enlargement as new member countries will have wider range of opportunities for university studies or in the labour market. So far surveys merely observe how young people are able to use these new ways of spending their free time, how they acquire technical tools and new literacy. P. Sak and K. Saková consider the issue of effects of new technologies on people and society. We know today of the great generation gaps as far as use of media is concerned. These differences do not affect traditional generations in the historical sense – i.e. those defined by important historical events (20-year interval).

Technological innovations in the sphere of information technologies appear in considerably shorter time intervals, thereby shifting recent youngest generations into middle and older generations before they even have time to realise it themselves. The dynamics of the availability of PCs in households, schools and offices is much lower than the rise in Internet accessibility. Explosion in mobile phone ownership is unique. Czech republic (76 per cent) tops the list, followed by Slovenia, Estonia and Slovakia. In this respect, sociological theory cooperates with the concept of cyberculture and uses it to express the expected changes in human behaviour, organisation, participation. Information technologies have brought us some evidently negative phenomena (P. Lévy) – but exploitation, dominance, dependence and isolation while disturbing do not have as heavy consequences as “collective stupidity” caused by verbal abuse and the conformity of virtual societies.

P. Sak, as a youth sociologist, introduces a new concept into this theory – that of “digitalisation of youth’s living field”. We recommend his earlier publication *Metamorphoses of Czech Youth* to all readers wishing to find out more about this concept. “The penetration of media into the living fields and lifestyle is so pronounced that we can call the new generation “media youth”. (p. 194) This is proven not only by the amount of time young people are spending in front of a TV or a PC. Their way of communication is undergoing fundamental changes and the proportion of face-to-face communication is decreasing. This, according to P. Sak, is of paramount importance. On one hand the living field is expanding in all its elements (social, mental, biological) and is being restructured. “The quality of biological field is worsening and its significance is decreasing. Similarly, the declining trend of “the vital” in favour of “the virtual” means a reduction and elimination of the biological element from living field.” (p. 203) This expansion – a result of expanding technology without appropriate changes in sociability, including moral components is regarded by P. Sak as dangerous: “There is a real threat of a socio-gravitational breakdown.” (s. 203)

In our review of *Metamorphoses of Czech Youth* (Youth and Society 2000, No. 4) we appreciated author’s reminder of F. Kahuda – a naturally controversial author, but one who has played an undoubtedly positive role in the context of short history of youth sociology.

I think that similarly, future generations of sociologists will find it difficult to come to terms with Sak’s concept of social field, which is untraditional to say the least.

In his own chapter *Life’s aims, life’s problems and life’s path* (p. 145-168) the author introduces a sophisticated sociological concept, “life’s scenario” – which he considers analogous with the well-known concept of “biological clock” – as a kind of social timetable of life. “Life’s scenario is a more generally structured entity of sociability. It includes a specific, intertwined cluster of “sociability atoms” such as norms, values, attitudes, models, patterns of behaviour, social mechanisms, life’s events and life’s aims. Life’s scenarios can be divided with respect to their place of functioning in the society, as well as according to their aim within the young generation. They encompass temporality, i.e. the latent dynamics of an individual’s life in social space and time.” (p. 146) According to P. Sak, an individual’s life and his own life’s scenario takes place under the influence of a “society’s life’s scenario”

determined by the given social circumstances. Only extraordinary individuals have managed to break the barriers of modality (example – women entering jobs formerly exclusively for men).

Current processes of europeisation and globalisation weaken this pressure and we can expect grater opportunities to create one's own life's scenario. This is suggested also by the theory of individualisation as we know it in today's sociology of youth.

In this part, using historical, sociological as well as political theories, author explains his concept of transformations of Czechoslovak society particularly in modern history defined by the events of 1968 and 1989. He correctly assumes that these events were results as well as consequences of life's aims, problems, scenarios, individual paths and those of groups and generations. Of particular interest is Sak's search for analogies in what happened in our society before the Prague Spring of 1968 and Velvet Revolution of 1989 from the viewpoint of projections, visions or scenarios of future changes. Whereas in the first case the impulses were a psychological product of a period of intellectual and artistic "fermentation" before 1968, in November 1989 the product was that of a period of stagnation.

It is not the only analogy possible. It may well be that there was certain "fermentation" in the intellectual and artistic society during this period (perhaps only in Slovakia ?). The whole period after 1985 is seen by political scientists as "time of perestroika". This has allowed our sociologists too to begin revising many theoretically ideological taboos, to create new hypotheses and theories. We were able to solve many personnel trespasses – which came with the normalisation – in a very courageous way. The conflict between sociologists and the political power of Communist party as far as science was concerned was natural. Second congress of Slovak sociologists that met in Martin in September 1989 foreshadowed the real weakness of their power. It enabled "bunching" (R. Roško) of a proportion of political actors of the revolution-to-be and at the same time indicated that the chance of a fundamental change of political system is realistic.

It is a fact that once the sociologists have prepared the conditions for change, they are replaced by politicians as actors of revolutions. The latter are then often clueless and the former powerless.

Reviewer's reflection merely serves to warn the author of just how complicated it will be if he decides to continue with this chapter. It could be seen as a beginning of a sociologically – political study which would transcend the boundaries of youth sociology. Of course, in this discussion the author is joined by a wide range of political scientists, sociologists and historians. It is therefore legitimate to say this part of the book is special not only with regard to its authorship. It is clear P. Sak wrote it in the distinctive way and inserted it into this publication because of a specific reason. The critic appreciates author's courageous step into the lions' den. His sociological reflection of social transformations between 1965 and 2004 could be the first move towards commemorating his own special anniversary next year with a scientific reflection of his individual "life's path".

Here in Slovakia, when we think of the journal *Sociology*, that privilege belongs to generation of sociologists in their sixties. Published interviews with J. Pašiak, R. Roško, D. Alijevová, L. Macháček, G. Blaas and J. Stena allow us to look back on modern history of our society in a special and unique way. It is not just a privilege – it is also a responsibility towards the generation of young sociologists-scientists, who use the biographies of actors of institutionalised as well as non-institutionalised sociology to understand the position of sociology in social transformations.

Ladislav Macháček