

# Masaryk, Weber, and the Czech situation from the Norwegian perspective: an interview with Pål Veiden

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**Pål Veiden** is a sociologist from the Oslo Metropolitan University. He wrote his doctoral thesis on a comparative study of social inequality in Austria and Norway. His main research interests are nationalism, integration, and the history of sociology. He teaches at OsloMet on the subject of State/Nation and the theory of science. His latest publication is the book «Max Weber – Aktuelle perspektiver» / Max Weber – Contemporary relevance.

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*Jan Váně:* From time to time, Czech sociology is proud of the fact that the founders of its state, Masaryk and Beneš, were sociologists. But when we look at the subjects taught at individual sociological workplaces in the Czech Republic, only a minimum amount of attention is paid to Masaryk. As a result, in Pilsen, for example, students learn more about Masaryk from foreign teachers, e.g. from you. How did it come about that a Norwegian sociologist started to focus on Masaryk?

*Pål Veiden:* In the 1980s I read a book about Dubček, and Masaryk's name was mentioned there, stating that he was a philosopher and sociologist. As a student of sociology at the time, I became curious about this person, unknown to us, from the history of sociology. I asked for books written by Masaryk, and discovered that – in addition to many other subjects – he had also written about the Norwegian novelist Arne Garborg. Suddenly there was some sort of connection between old Czech/Czechoslovakian/Austrian history and my own country. Of course I already had – as did many Norwegians – great sympathy for the Czechoslovak people in their fight against Soviet repression. I remember a demonstration in Oslo on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1978 – the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invasion.

*Jan Váně:* Do you think Masaryk has anything else to offer to sociology students, either in the Czech Republic or in Norway? And if so, what, or why?

*Pål Veiden:* We can learn a lot by studying his biography! It's all there: courage, luck, catastrophes, Central Europe from 1850 to the 1930s will be better understood by looking into the life of this man. I was surprised to learn that most students – at least in Plzen – knew Masaryk “only” as a politician, not also as an interesting figure in sociology. But sociology is about understanding individuals through a “whole” called society, and Masaryk is indeed an interesting case.

His work on suicide was published 16 years before Durkheim's famous study, which referred to Masaryk. Then again there is no doubt that Durkheim was the better scientist of the two, as Masaryk never let go of his moral and normative views. Masaryk represented a fascinating mixture of science and morals, which his analyses of religion and nation/nationals prove clearly. Present-day social science is also largely driven from normative positions, but we have learned to hide this more than Masaryk did. Ernest Gellner, the distinguished anthropologist, was an admirer of Masaryk, but stressed that Masaryk was *wrong*: his geopolitical trust in France for example, or his view of history in general. For Masaryk, history had a *meaning*, and maybe we

should ask the same question today: what are the goals of societal evolution? I think the most important is: We can learn from Masaryk to be braver; to talk and write against the common opinion. Masaryk was at times hated by nationalist students and politicians, but there is no doubt that he was often right, not at least in his struggles against antisemitism and the fight for a democratic state.

*Jan Váně:* I know that you're currently working on a monograph on Weber, and in addition to that, you're now translating Adorno into Norwegian. Aren't these sociologists already outdated? Why do you pay attention to these authors in particular?

*Pål Veiden:* In the beginning of the 90s, Jiří Musil told me – nodding at a picture of Weber in his office – “we can learn a lot from him these days”. Musil was right, we still can. It's about academic discipline, about creating general concepts in the storm of individual events, grasping the consequences of religion, and – no less importantly – to study the importance of the rational state based upon rational bureaucracy. The problem with Weber is that he seems so boring, but he was and is not. He can teach us to leave the ethics of virtue out of the social sciences while stressing the consequentialist ethics. Weber, together with Durkheim and Marx, are rightly regarded as the classical sociologists. They asked the questions that we should still strive to find answers for.

As for Adorno, I am translating his small book on “Rechtsradikalismus”. Adorno was a great thinker, but hardly a sociologist. His views on the right-wing movements in the 1960s are at once relevant and outdated. His views on quantitative research are interesting, and again at the same time probably the end of empirical sociology! Yes, Adorno was a great thinker, but I am not sure whether he was right – a view that hard-core fans will – I guess – regard as simple and banal.

*Jan Váně:* Most of the time you're on the border between political science and political sociology, and you pay attention to issues related to nationalism. Why do these themes fascinate you?

*Pål Veiden:* The two-faced picture of nationalism has always fascinated me. It's just like the villain in the Batman-movies; good or bad, you toss a coin. . . There are two sides of the same phenomenon. Nationalism on one hand means integration and belongingness, telling the big story of who we are. Obviously, in addition there is the other story; the one of aggression and hatred towards other people, nations and so on.

Nations are not natural, they are of course created by man, but they are real, and people identify with the nation. Parts of the liberal Left seem to forget this. On the other side of the political spectrum, populists tend to give the nation a sort of holy status. The historical facts show us that nations can disappear, and new nations can be created. Today's Austria is an example of this. Nobody was speaking of an Austrian nation before 1914, “Austrian” pointed to the Habsburg Empire with its different nations. Austria was a state, not a nation. This changed after the Second World War, when Austrians identify with both state and nation. They are no longer Germans, although they of course use the German language.

*Jan Váně:* In the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 1990s, we thought that nationalism was dead and ecology would be one of the big themes. But the questions of nationalism are returning, and so are ecological ones, such as the problem of climate change, as symbolized by Greta Thunberg. Why do you think it is that nationalism is rearing its head again?

*Pål Veiden:* Because it was always there. The communists regarded it as gone; it was supposed to be replaced by a new world of international communist solidarity. Such a thing never existed, and probably never will. Czech nationalism is interesting – its struggle against Germany, old Austria

and Russia; it's partly a brave struggle, but then again: Palacký wrote his *History of Bohemia* first in German, and Masaryk had a 100 % German education; he was born of a German speaking mother and a Slovak Father, and became the greatest of all Czechs. That points to the flexibility of nation and nationalism! I think a mild form of nationalism is no problem. Certain academics will often emphasize their lack of nationalism, and that's fine, but they hardly represent the "silent majority". The problems begin of course when nationalism develops into aggression and pure racism, establishing a hierarchy of more and less worthy nations. That way of thinking and acting has also – sadly enough – not ended.

*Jan Váně:* What are your views on the role of environmental issues and their impact on sociological approaches as they concern the study of social reality?

*Pål Veiden:* This is the new big topic. In Norway we have had environmental sociology for some years now. Recently the Norwegian Research Found has put a lot of money into a project called "MEATigation: Towards sustainable meat use in Norwegian food practices for climate mitigation". This project is also carried out from a gender perspective, which is the safe way to obtain money for social sciences in Norway. But environmental issues and consumption have been the subject of serious research for years. Consumption Research Norway (SIFO), an institute connected with OsloMet, employs many skilled sociologists.

Talking about the rationally planned Greta-Phenomenon, I am fascinated by the partial breakdown of political culture in which politicians are becoming uncritical fans of this Swedish teenager. Or to put it another way: Even president Zeman now and then has some good points. . .

*Jan Váně:* Do you see any possibility that sociology could continue to attract attention and convince us of its present-day importance (if you compare the Czech and Norwegian environments)?

*Pål Veiden:* Sociologists in every country, including our two countries, should say along with Weber: "the call of our science is to say that which is reluctantly heard", as he stated in his inaugural lecture. Parts of the economic science have turned into a theology around the holy market, which are abstract models with little or no empirical base. On the other hand, some people, not at least in the Scandinavian welfare states, have found a new secular god in the overwhelming public sector. One of the tasks for sociology is to study the relationship between the state, market, and civil society. It's nothing new in that program, but it's still valid. Sociology is about the integration of individuals into different forms of collectiveness – how could that be outdated? And to finish where we started, with Masaryk, who wrote in 1881: "It is the problem of the writer in the social sphere, if anywhere, not to offer the reader final answers, but rather to move him to thought and – to action."

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