

**Ivo**

**Možný**

**Why So  
Easily ...**

Some Family Reasons  
for the Velvet Revolution  
(A Sociological Essay)

## Why So Easily ...

Some Family Reasons for the Velvet Revolution

A Sociological Essay

**Ivo Možný**

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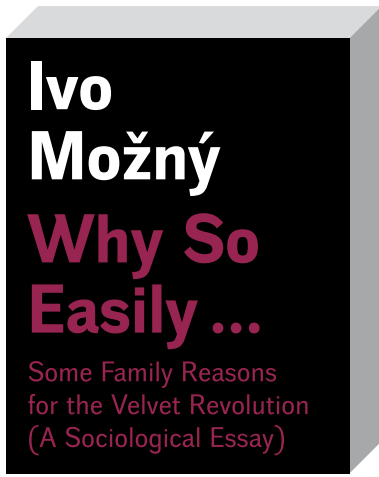


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[ebooks@karolinum.cz](mailto:ebooks@karolinum.cz)







**KAROLINUM PRESS**

To Josef Škvorecký, author of *The Cowards*.

With great respect.





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*Across the ponds the forest started to murmur, and as the shadow of the summer clouds amply fills the hollow with its little town, and then moves up the opposite slope, before halting for a long time beneath Kaňúr on the Slovak border - seemingly motionless due to the great distance - I have a premonition that suddenly everything will change: without us, simply due to its nature, or due to the Earth's regular rotation.*

Ludvík Vaculík, July 1982<sup>1</sup>

*The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to improve the principles of the construction of reality - in particular, social reality - is a major dimension of political power.*

Pierre Bourdieu

**1** Transl. by Gerald Turner.

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

As I introduce this booklet to the reader for the third time, I cannot help but notice how dramatically the times are a-changing. The entire political landscape has changed from when I wrote my essay twenty years ago. Where are the old foreign travel permits<sup>2</sup>, where is the hope I had that in spring I would manage to get my hands on a bicycle and that fridges might be available in the run up to Christmas? Where is the capitalism described by the Communist Party newspaper *Rudé právo* that we were destined not only to catch up with but to overtake, where are the women fighting for peace?! What's more, the priorities of the age are different. Who back then had heard of energy dependency, the global war on terrorism, the ominously rising sovereign debt and the creeping distaste for parliamentary democracy...? The readers themselves have changed. They no longer have to wait in an endless queue for an apartment, though they now are burdened by a mortgage. They buy a car before they've even had their first child, and no longer send their underlings to represent them so they can carry on building their weekend cottage, but instead find themselves wondering how they will pay the mortgage if their business closes down in the crisis... Why are people still buying this essay?

Twenty years ago I attempted to understand a society characterised by despotic socialism and explain some of the mechanisms that had allowed it to function successfully for so long. As this society becomes history, the old regime is being transformed before our very eyes into something from a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. Or perhaps a comic puppet show. On the stage, in front of the flimsy scenery, a series of characters enter jerkily: the Communist, the Dissident, the StB agent, the Independent, the Apparatchik... and in

<sup>2</sup> *výjezdní doložka*, a document that had to be accompanied by the recommendation of an employer, school, military command or national committee: translator's note, henceforth t/n.

the background, of course, a crowd of extras playing the Ordinary People. “Where would I fit in?” you ask yourself. Well, you’d probably be Škrhola<sup>3</sup>.

The protagonists of this puppet show must be cast carefully. If it were based in fact, there would be no one left in the group of extras. A large number of the Ordinary People over time played many different roles, sometimes simultaneously. In 1990, I learned that three of my best friends from the normalisation period (1970–80s) had been StB collaborators. One of these Agents was also a Dissident, one an Independent, and one a Communist. It goes without saying that all three were fundamentally decent people, punctilious professionals and upstanding intellectuals, and always had been. After all, the StB did not recruit rogues and kept well clear of nonentities. Instead, it blackmailed into submission people that enjoyed the respect of those around them.

This is all so difficult to understand from today’s vantage point. For those who were not around at the time, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the mega-narrative is so wonderfully logical, clear and compelling – not to speak of the fact that it is always so tempting to judge your parents. On the contrary, it is far more difficult to ask whether your own conduct does not include the same elements of opportunism by which our petty lives deal with the great movement of history, but now simply garbed in a flashier jacket. And for those who were there at the time, things remain difficult because the media fairy tale gets entangled in their own personal memories. The process of selective memory, with which we are all fortunately equipped, kicks in, since otherwise our inability to come to terms with our own past would drive us mad.

Our lives are lived in episodes and we can only understand them as a story. Each of these stories is at the same time constructed as an

**3** A figure from puppet theatre a bit like Punch in English theatre, who represents the archetypal country bumpkin: t/n.