

## ON THE RESEARCH QUESTION

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This chapter deals with the process of finding and developing the research question. When drawing it up, I built on in particular, my long-term research interest, which is class and the working class, on my broader research history, and also on my experience with teaching methodological courses on qualitative research. I consider the research question to be the most important part of research because, among other reasons, all of the other issues, i.e. the selection of theories and concepts, the methodology and method, the structure of arguments and thereby the final form of a text or texts resulting from the research, are related to it. The research question is generated as an outcome after a topic or theme of research, has been pondered over for a long period of time. It clearly follows from the foregoing that the choice of topic and question always go hand in hand with decisions about the setting, location, and cases we are going to study (for details on the setting and location see the chapter on ethnography in this volume).

### **The Research Question and Debates in the Field of Studies**

A good research question relates to the debates held in our own or related fields of studies. In connection with class, the author of the bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the French economist Thomas Piketty regrets to state that the ‘social sciences have largely lost interest in the distributions of wealth and questions of social class since the 1970’ [Piketty 2014: 32]. His thesis could be confirmed by taking a look at all 37 research networks within the European Sociological Association, where class, but also inequality, stratification and poverty, do not appear at all<sup>1</sup>. Sociologists themselves argue about whether class

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.europeansociology.org/research-networks-menu.html>.

is or is not a relevant category. The embarrassment over the concepts of class and the working class are, particularly in the context of post-Communist countries, understandable since the previous regime gave them a strong ideological dimension, which most of the researchers shielding themselves with objectivity do not want to dirty their hands with. While, in the Czech context, Šanderová [1995] concludes that the concept of class is unusable for a productive discussion due to its multi-vocal (therefore unscientific) character, and proposes to reformulate the discussion using new terms and avoiding the term of class, my position is just the opposite. In line with Šanderová, I consider the term to be ambiguous and used inconsistently, however, this is exactly the reason why I find it to be sociologically interesting. I perceive contradictions as appropriate for opening a theme. The ambivalence of class is related to the ambiguous conceptions of this category in the political, media and lay discourses.

‘After many years of research in the field of gender studies, this means in the field that is usually described as new or fashionable (always in a derogative manner for not being scientific or traditional enough), I thus ended up with a topic that does not lack traditional sociological anchoring, however, from the point of view of many, it has survived only as a dead reminder of time that has already passed, an empty category that we can very well do without in interpreting society today’ [Nedbálková 2012: 85].

I will deal with the topic of class and the working class in detail with respect to the specific research questions in the later sub-chapter.

## **Researched, Non-researched, Marginal, and Major Topics**

Every so often, students justify their interest in a topic by stating that it has not yet been researched or that it is new or exotic. When examined closely, the newness often reveals itself to be only imaginary. The possibilities regarding how to grasp a topic are multiplied considerably when various sociological paradigms are compared and the social, cultural, political, media, historical, or geographical dimensions of the

topic are taken into account. As the subsequent examples of specific research topics will show, the same topic can be approached as narrow, specific, limited by a territory or a group of persons, or it can be built up as a case of a more general social phenomenon. A good example of a taboo topic is shown in the study by the founders of the grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss [1965], on death and dying. At the time of countless achievements and progress of modern medicine, death started to be perceived as a failure arising from a lack of successful treatment. The authors focused on death and dying in a hospital context. They formulated their research questions as follows:

‘What are the recurrent kinds of interaction between a dying patient and the hospital personnel? What kinds of tactics are used by the personnel who deal with the patient? Under what condition of hospital organization do these kinds of interaction and these tactics occur, and how do they affect the patient, his family, the staff, and the hospital itself, all of whom are involved in the situations surrounding dying?’ [Glaser, Strauss 1965: 8].

I consider the questions to be a good example because they represent social reality as relational, contextual and established in interactions; they include actors and their individual types, the organizational and institutional levels of the analysed environment.

In assessing the importance of a topic, it is possible to invoke, at both the academic and political levels, the number of persons whom the topic applies to. In the case of my former research of lesbian families, a colleague of mine raised the question of why one should bother dealing with something that relates to just four percent of the population, when we know so little about the remaining 96 percent. My understanding of the topic, however, was very different. My point was to show that the topic of homoparentality was not a marginal phenomenon with specific conceptualizations and researches, but that it significantly relates to the more general reference framework of the family as a dominant social institution, the family which is primarily perceived as gendered, heterosexual, and procreative. Non-heterosexual parenthood embodies a number of changes that have been generally accompanying the institu-

tion of family in particular over the last decades: postponing marriage to a later age, the formation of new patterns of intimacy, the loosening of traditional gender roles, or the increase in unmarried cohabitation. Homoparentality thus shifts from the category of the unusual and unthinkable into the sphere of paradigmatic illustrations of the diversity and transformation of kinship in post modern conditions.

The examples of class and homoparentality show that the peripheral or mainstream status of a topic is not given a priori with objective validity, a topic becomes major or minor with respect to the theoretical and methodological perspective and training of researchers. The 'Memory of Roma Workers' project also strived, inter alia, to liberate the topic from the primarily ethnical encoding. One of the objectives was to show 'acceptance of modern Roma history into the code of Czech history, for civic perception of Roma and Czech as equals, but at the same time preserving the sensitivity toward intercultural dialogue' [Sidiropulu Janků 2015: 19].

## Theory as a Hook

When consulting Bachelor's as well as Master's theses, some students would change several research ideas and topics in the horizon of a few weeks. No matter how important the interest, amazement, and enthusiasm for research may be, the key is the ability to develop the idea in greater detail. This happens through writing, which at first acquires the form of note-taking (research in the library, observations from everyday life, Internet sources, discussions with friends or colleagues). Mills, in the appendix to the famous *Sociological Imagination* recommends that one 'keep a journal as the sociologist's need for systematic reflection demands it', where one can record his/her ideas for current and future researches [Mills 1961: 196]. Today's digital technologies considerably extend recording and archiving facilities. The systematic nature and quality of a recording are nevertheless as important as is the order in the archive so that later we are able to trace back collected materials and resources in a somewhat logical manner.<sup>2</sup> As regards aca-

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<sup>2</sup> I myself use Zotero and Dropbox to archive academic literature, and a Word docu-

demic sources and literature, it is not quantity that should be seen as the impressive factor regarding collected materials. Theories and concepts are not pendants or ornaments endowing a text with academic erudition just for the sake of appearance. As a result of their careful selection and extensive knowledge, they become an integral part of our thinking about the topic and, subsequently, of our interpretation; they enable a better understanding of the researched matter, they help to clarify and explain.

In the case of my doctoral thesis about the subcultures in women's prisons, I was initially inspired by the text written by the Slovenian sociologist Darja Zaviršek [1997], who was interested in the gender structure of residential institutions for people with mental illnesses and the gendered character of the diagnosis of mental disorders in general. I decided to follow on from her framing of the topic and transfer it into the context of the prison.

'An example of a research question: Are gender-specific patterns of the organization of the social world recognizable also in a world populated only by representatives of one sex? In other words, are masculinity and femininity identifiable even in an environment where only men or only women stay together in a limited space for a determined time? What forms do male and female patterns of behaviour acquire here?' [Nedbálková 2006: 10].

If we are inspired by a theory or a concept, we should not forget that the role of such lies in clarifying the question that interests us in a research. The aim is not to demonstrate that we can apply the concept to our topic, this means to conclude that the prison is a gendered organisation as defined by Acker [1992], or that the everyday operation of public toilets reveals the symbolic violence described by Pierre Bourdieu [1989]. Goffman encourages treating the concepts with affection, this

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ment for writing down ideas for further research or for jotting down observations that are not directly related to my current research (but may come in handy, for example in tuition). I copy or rewrite my notes from a telephone or paper notepad, which I always carry with me, to the Word document. I deal with taking fieldnotes specifically in the chapter on ethnography (in this volume).

means carefully searching for connections in the whole context and the appropriateness of utilization, thinking about interpretations, comparing. Using a metaphor of dressing, he adds, 'better, perhaps, different coats to clothe the children well than a single splendid tent in which they all shiver' [Goffman 1961: xiv]. Strong interpretative frameworks that are built on the basis of literature can conceal the sparsity or weakness of the obtained data. However, they lead us to strong conclusions when a theory is confirmed [Kusá 2015]. In writing, the theory illuminates but also ties down; it can guide us along a too narrow road, so it is therefore desirable to be attentive to its details and treat it in a critical manner when writing, to combine and compare multiple concepts or interpretative frameworks, which are always applied with care and sense for the concept and the selected topic.

Research always means adopting a position. In a better case, we make our perspective obvious through writing, the manner of arguing, in a worse case, we hide behind objective neutrality (which is not further clarified). Whatever our option may be, the choice (always made as one of many) of a position represents a commitment and manifests itself in all the phases of research activities, including publishing strategies and the actual writing. Positionality is associated with feminist research which 'is often dismissed as just another specialization, where in fact its arguments have wider relevance to other forms and types of research' [Caplan in Skeggs 2001: 428]. The authors who ascribe to the feminist paradigm draw attention to the coherence of various categories (class, ethnicity, and gender) which cannot be treated as explain-it-all meta-categories. 'Gender is no longer seen as the primary determinant of women's lives and the constitutions and disruptions of other categorizations such as race and class are seen to be as important as gender' [Skeggs 2001: 429], the same is true of the primacy of class, ethnicity or race. Mappes-Niediek, for example, asks the question, in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, whether the subject of the Romany should be framed as social or ethnic, and argues for the first option, explaining that it is essentially a problem of poverty, unemployment, education, under funded health care, and underdeveloped infrastructure [Mappes-Niediek 2013: 16–17]. Thus, the categories and concepts in which we think about a research topic

have direct implications regarding what we are able to see and discover about the given topic.

## **The Vague and Banal Question**

Non-quantitative oriented researches often lead to questions starting with the word 'how' or to a question for meaning (what meaning is attributed to something), then the variation is the question of how something is socially constructed. While the social constructivism is an important paradigmatic perspective, the research question acquires meaning only if it goes beyond such a generally defined framework and develops the constructing as contextual, full of all sorts of tensions and contradictions, as the constructing which has a structural and individual dimension. I remember a case when a student filed a complaint about the evaluation of her state examination on methodology because the lecturer allowed herself to comment, 'It is not clear what the question examines, what it means in fact, what the question proposed by her actually asks about ("How do people socially construct the building of a house of worship?")'. A more appropriate reformulating of the question would lie in specifying the dimensions within which we will focus on the building. Will we be interested in different types of actors? Which ones? If the building of a house of worship provokes discussions, we can focus on mapping ideological arguments, overlaps and conflicts, individual positions, in lay, academic, media, and political discourse. We can choose only the media image of the building of a house of worship and compare its forms and contents in various media. We can also be interested in the ways of solidarity and of belonging, which are mobilized in the course of construction, the values that are referred to. It is necessary to ask developing questions from the very beginning of thinking about a topic, but it is also apparent that their specific form and direction changes in the research process. Sometimes it is useful to consider the main and secondary research questions because it is not possible to grasp a topic by means of only one question.

It is also a subject-matter of thinking about the research question as to whether we will be able to answer the question by using data and materials that we have available or are planning to use. Whether the

question implies field work, gathering statistical data, or whether we may find an answer to it in a library or in the materials and statistics that already exist. The research question cannot be trivial and should not invoke a one-word answer, which can also be assumed in advance, even without research. The following can serve as an example: Can we observe the influence of gender stereotypes in the communication of kindergarten teachers with children? It is preferable to use the introductory 'how', this means to inquire about the programmes, activities and organisations of everyday life through which gender stereotypes are reproduced in the kindergarten. However, the aim of the research is not to denounce gender stereotypes as bad, but to show in detail and closely how gender stereotypes are established and reproduced through everyday, petty and often imperceptible practices that are imprinted in the operation modes and routines of social institutions and organizations. It would also be worth considering whether to narrow or clearly focus the topic, for example by focusing on the reactions of children, teachers or parents in the situations when children do not choose gender-appropriate toys and activities. It is also possible to research coherences or contradictions between the observed behaviour of teachers and their declared attitudes to the issue of gender roles.

### **Ways toward and Motivations for the Research Topic**

The previous sections, which were devoted to different aspects of the research topic and question, also showed the multiplicity of ways that bring us to them. Analytically, they can be divided into theoretical and methodological (the predetermined choice of a theory or methodology or method), experiential (an experience that can be personal or mediated, long-term or episodic) and instrumental. The instrumental way is for example being involved in the research topic of a professor/supervisor or performing a research assignment announced by a public or private institution. Such an option can provide financial security and certainty of institutional patronage and leadership; on the other hand, it determines our choices of the framing of the topic that will need to fit into the ideas of the supervisor, ordering party, or sponsor.



An example of the interest through a mediated experience is Haruki Murakami's *Underground*. The writer, who is known primarily as an author of fiction, published a book in 2001 about the Tokyo subway sarin attack. As he describes in the introduction, he was brought to the topic by a brief report in a newspaper where the wife of one of the victims described the persistent psychological after-effects that the attack left on her husband, together with all the related emotional and physical difficulties of the whole family. The author was personally moved by the story and decided to write about it, however, he did not choose the novel form to deal with the topic but proceeded from authorial transcripts of his interviews with people who were exposed to the attack (the subway operators, passengers, passers-by as well as members of the group of attackers).<sup>3</sup>

Another type of empirical shortcut to a topic is also coincidence. During research I conducted for my Master's thesis focused on the urban gay and lesbian subculture, my way led, on recommendation, to public toilets where I originally wanted to focus on impersonal sex between men. However, my intention was to capture through this institution the historic establishment of the gay subculture in the Czech Republic. I thought that it was these places that had made up an important part of the subculture before 1989, this means at the time when no official gay and lesbian bars, clubs or organizations existed, and homosexuals were registered by the State Security in order to blackmail them later. Public toilets, along with other sites such as saunas, showers in swimming pools, parks, and train stations, in addition to functioning as cruising places also represented one of the few opportunities for meeting a person of the same sexual orientation. During my first research visit to public toilets I met Mrs. Marta, a 75-year retired woman, who finally gave me, to my surprise, the diaries that she had kept about her work for several years. In the end, the diaries were not useful for the

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<sup>3</sup> The book is also inspirational in the way how the author works with the interviews. Each interview is preceded by familiarization with the interviewee, where the author selects and combines, in a revealing manner, the information that appears to be substantial and significant in relation to the event being surveyed. This creates a colourful picture of the specific event as well as the persons who intentionally or accidentally become the stakeholders.

study of the subculture because their content did not really correspond to my original question formulated as follows: What features could characterize the public space of the homosexual subculture in Brno as we come across it through selected institutions? Later, I returned to the diaries with the following question: How is a social structure reproduced as regards the institution of public toilets and what does our analysis of this process say about the interaction among the categories of gender, class, and ethnicity? What are the forms acquired by the public and private disciplining view in this case? [Nedbálková 2009]. When I look at the questions from a distance today, I evaluate the first as too descriptive, the others as too abstract and formal, both of them formulated without the social relevance that would portray the subject as topical, one way or another, or politically relevant.

The test of the relevance of a question and the research objectives may well be searching for opportunities of when we can share the topic with someone else. When thinking about the topic of the working class, a colleague of mine asked me the question whether it is my ambition to write for people from my own paradigm (meaning gender studies that he considered a limited sector of social knowledge), or for a wider audience. The question was an opportunity to think about what kinds of audiences I want to relate to, which of them I want to reach. An interesting experience came my way later on during my one-week stay at hospital, sharing a room with Mrs. Míla, with whom I talked about family, illness, and of course, work as well. Mrs. Míla told me that when I was not in the room, she looked at the titles of the books I had on my bedside table, and that she would therefore like to know exactly what I did. I tried to explain it precisely on the theme of the working class, but my answer did not satisfy me. I could not refer to any paradigms or sociological debates, my interest suddenly seemed absurd to me, which was frustrating considering the fact that Mrs. Míla was, due to her profession, much closer to my research interest than I was, and my ambition was to turn to people like Mrs. Míla in my writing.

The ways leading to the topic are related to the motivations for research and writing, which also necessarily reflect our idea of sociology as a discipline and its role. Does sociology explain the relationships and connections between social phenomena and variables? Does it bring

light into what is obscure or, vice versa, does it show that things are not what they appear to be at first (traditional, media, political, or secular) sight? Should sociologists be advisers in managing society and ensuring its optimal functioning through expert guidance or do they stand outside the field of the instrumental logic of utility? These questions cannot be answered within the framework of the discipline with universal validity; it is always a reflection of the position of the particular researcher within the sociological field.

## **An Example of Class and the Working Class**

In the following section, I will study in detail several research variations on the topic of class that will later be followed by the topic of the working class. Class is a concept with a historical trajectory, and has itself become a subject of research. One of the types of research on class is therefore a historical overview of its conceptualisations, as we find them for example in Giddens's *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* [1973] or a historical view of the working class in England *Making of the English Working Class* [Thompson 1966]. The title of Thompson's book and its introduction is at the same time claiming the paradigm position where class is not perceived as a 'structure, nor even as a category, but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships' [Thompson 1966: 10]. Thus, the process of classification and naming of classes, which is not a neutral tool for description but something directly giving a shape to social reality, including classes, necessarily comes to the centre of researchers' attention. Hout, Brooks and Manza consider 'the theoretical question for the next decade, 'Why is class so complex? And why is it dependent on politics instead of determinative of politics?' [Hout, Brooks, Manza 1993: 271]. The question points to the decline of class politics [Ost 2015: 16] in the form of political interests mobilized by actors and emphasizes the interaction of various discourses (including the expert or sociological), which contribute to whether and how class and classes are reflected on. The topic is raised not only as a social science but also as a highly political subject, which of course also entails the media dimension of the studied issue. The manner of developing

individual spheres also largely depends on the paradigm or paradigms within which we work on the topic. If we start from the theoretical or conceptual motivation, the range of approaches in relation to class is very wide and includes, for example, Marx's concept of class (his critics and followers), Weber's distinction of class, status and party, Durkheim's occupational groups, the stratification research, Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization or feminist theories. While some approaches stand in mutual opposition of opinions, others coexist side by side without any considerable interest, and others combine one with another and complement each other. A concrete example of theoretical paper linking the critical theory and the sociology of culture is the study by Nový, who similarly to the authors mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter sees class in the realm of politics and collective consciousness, and 'stresses the interconnectedness and inseparability of the concepts of class and class struggle in critical theory, and ponders their usage in the sociology of culture' [Nový 2014: 554]. Another theoretically based study of class is the *Is Durkheim a Class Analyst?* [2005] paper by Grusky and Galescu, the authors point out that Durkheim's account of the occupational group provides the foundation for a new class analysis that is tailor-made for contemporary research purposes. The authors thus rank among those who more generally criticize the *big classes* that the stratification research works with.

Unlike the quoted theoretically-based objectives, questions of the stratification based research focus on the testing of measuring instruments or monitoring the transformation of inequality and social mobility in a certain period and the political and geographical context. Since the 1960s, the stratification research has gained a dominant position not only in the field of study of social inequalities, but is sometimes mistaken for sociology in general. It works with *big classes* of the type of the higher and lower salariat, white collar, petite bourgeoisie, blue collar, skilled and unskilled manual workers and the unemployed [see Rose, Harrison, Pevalin in Katrňák, Fučík 2010: 41] or, as the case may be, entrepreneurs, higher grade professionals, the self-employed, middle grade professionals, clerks, skilled workers and unskilled workers [see Machonin 2003, 2004]. Nevertheless, the inclusion in a class is primarily derived from the position of the individual in the labour market,

from the degree of occupational autonomy and the extent of work responsibilities in the workplace. Weeden, Grusky [2005, 2012] argue against the stratification research and criticize it for generating classes that do not exist in reality (they do not correlate with the living conditions they are to represent), and so lose their explanation value for the understanding of the behaviour of social actors. On the one hand, they cluster together disparate groups of the population that greatly differ in their living conditions and prospects, on the other hand, they ignore the institutionally anchored links or hierarchies in the labour market that do have significant implications for life style. According to critics, attention is overly focused on making advanced statistical operations precise and on the modelling of the relationships between variables, while the interest in deeper understanding and explanation vanishes. The field of class research thus becomes also the territory of dispute about the method and its place in the social science research. Kaufman criticizes the tendency to deliver data and complex methodological techniques as the primary objective of the research [Kaufman 2010: 18], similarly, about half a century earlier, Mills advised avoiding the fetishism of method and technique [Mills 1961: 224]. Following the same logic, it would be possible to deliberate over the fetishism of the theory, see the previous section that concerns itself with the pitfalls of full affiliation with a certain school or conceptualization.

The previous approaches differentiate not only between research methods and reflections of the methodology or among relationships to the theory, but they also differ significantly in their relation to the category of power. The stratification theories came under criticism because they ignored power, mainly from the positions of Marxist sociology for which, on the contrary, power had a substantially explaining character.

‘Economic advantages and disadvantages, affluence and deprivation, are anchored in structures of exploitation and domination, not simply in differences among individuals in the ability to compete in markets. To state the matter starkly: the rich benefit from the poor being poor, and the poor are poor in part because of what the rich do to get and stay rich’ [Wright 2005: 1].

The Marxist concept of class primarily distinguishes two classes, capitalists and workers, depending on the ownership of the means of production or their absence respectively. Workers are exploited by capitalists, who can be mobilized if it is realized, and class consciousness is born. The relational reasoning of the exploitation then logically generates a different perspective of the working class than that offered by stratification theories that treat classes as objective descriptive schemes. Skeggs [2012] writes about the exploitation through media in TV reality shows, in which persons with a lower social status are portrayed as uncivilized, vulgar, without taste, or stupid. Leicht generally sees a link between the demise of traditional blue-collar professions and the growth in popularity of the television competitions where ordinary people are appreciated for their skills in singing, dancing, or some other talent [Leicht 2014: 493]. ‘The working class has been vilified and romanticised, it is the former positioning which currently dominates’ [Skeggs in Taylor 2007: 11]. Workers are often displayed through excesses in a variety of areas (conduct, appearance, housing, sexuality) [Skeggs 2004: 99–105]. Similarly, the Romany are, in the context of the Czech Republic, described as those who speak too loudly or even scream, gesticulate and spectacularly consume, which is perceived as unmatched by adequate incomes or good taste.

Žižek notes the rising nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe, which becomes a substitute for the mentioned absence of class politics [Žižek in Kalb, Halmai 2011: 14]. Bartha explores the “‘forms of workers” new subalternity in the new capitalist regimes in East Germany and Hungary’ [Bartha 2014: 309] and shows a growing nostalgia for the former regime, which is the way how ordinary people express their social criticism in a situation when there is no established left-wing variant of the critics of capitalism in the political spectrum [ibid.]. In the context of the Czech Republic, this type of nationalism and populism can be observed in the anti-Roma marches and demonstrations (for example, in Northern Bohemia in 2011 or later in Ostrava) or current (2015) anti-Islamic and anti-refugee demonstrations. In the debates on migration, the right wing appeals to the values and rights of ‘ordinary people’ (and the legitimacy of their fear) to whom left-wing political parties cannot or do not want to offer support, solidar-

ity and collective consciousness and who are fastened on nationalism as something that gives meaning and a sense of belonging to their lives, something that relieves them of the fear of things uncertain and foreign.

The working class appeared to be more understandable historically, sociologically and by laymen when it was personified by men and work in heavy industry. Traditional trades are disappearing, the working class is increasingly present, among others, in the service sector, and the proportion of women in the working class is thus becoming more visible. Julie Bettie focuses specifically on women within the US context. The author studied class differences at the girls' high school in California, and she asked the following questions: 'How the young women experience and understand class differences in their peer culture and how their and their parents' class location and racial/ethnic identity shaped the girls' perceptions of social differences at school and the possibilities for their futures' [Bettie 2003: 7]. With her approach, Bettie subscribes to the feminist theory, which, like Marxist sociology, emphasizes the aspect of power, but also thematizes the intersectionality of this approach to class, that is to say the already mentioned interconnection with ethnicity, race, gender, religion, or sexuality. Similarly, the 'Memory of Roma Workers' project is exceptional in the re-framing of the Romany theme through becoming closer in ordinariness [Sidiropulu Janků 2015: 19], and through the integration of the Romany into the category of workers. The Romany, coming from rural areas to industrial cities and the borderland to seek jobs after the war [Schuster 2015], is a good example of the transformation of work in the post-modern society. Work, that had previously ensured the certainty of a stable income and housing, has been gradually failing to meet this function and losing its position as the main source of identification, it is uncertain, precarious. The restructuring and transformation of the labour market caused hesitation over how to talk about the working class (and class in general), how to define it, how to treat it politically and in the media. New classifications with new classes have been emerging. Guy Standing [2011] comes up with the term precariat, which he uses to refer to a rather heterogeneous group characterized by a lack of income opportunities, income inse-

curity, uncertainty of an employment contract, which fails to guarantee stability of employment, the lack of retraining opportunities, and also the uncertainty of representation through unions and collective agreements.

The goal of any type of writing about disadvantaged groups, which the working class can be increasingly considered to belong to, is however not to:

‘[...] document their everyday world in an effort to attract sympathy for their plight. It is to dissect the social mechanisms and meanings that govern their practices, ground their morality (if such be the question), and explain their strategies and trajectories, as one would do for any social category, high or low, noble or ignoble’ [Wacquant 2002: 1470].

The quotation of Wacquant goes beyond the descriptive and objective documentary goals of research questions and leads to the perception of the interdependence between the planes of actors and social structures.

## **The Research Question and Research Writing**

I have repeatedly mentioned in this paper that thinking about a topic is related to the process of writing. In his treatise dedicated to graduate students, Howard Becker advises them to start writing early. ‘If you start writing early in your research you can begin cleaning up your thinking sooner’ [Becker 1986: 17–18]. The same is true of the research question, the sooner and in more detail we think about it, the better it then takes care of our final text. Writing means rewriting, finding the right words, arguments, theses and their sequence. One of my most joyous experiences with writing was my dissertation, when I set myself the target of writing one page every day from the very beginning (i.e. my study stay at the University of Toronto). Some pages were hard earned, some mindless, some written with ease, some days I wrote several pages, some days none. I consider the habit of sitting at your computer every day, opening a text file and writing to be both good



and productive. The opportunity of discussing a research idea or question with someone else as I mentioned in the introductory section can also be used in the process of writing. After all, the manuscript of this book came into existence similarly. The personal meetings of authors where we exchanged our texts in pairs, set aside enough time to read and then comment on them, was one of the most enjoyable moments in the creation of the book. During rewriting and critical reading, useless parts of a text can be avoided or contrariwise attention can be drawn to the spots in a text that are not sufficiently explained, are confused or their place and meaning in the text is not clear. Becker warns of fancy writing and the use of meaningless expressions [ibid.: 7]. Similarly, we should be cautious in the use of sociological jargon as an inclination towards a sociological school or approach may tempt us to do because 'how we write is linked directly to how we read' [Hammersley, Atkinson 1995: 239].

To capture the plasticity, multiplicity and physicality, corporeality and the unrefined nature of the social world in the form of a text often seems to be difficult (for other means of grasping the world around us see Staveník or Kubala in this volume). I take my concern about research questions<sup>4</sup> (my own and those in the texts of others) as a way of exercising the academic hygiene, the goal of which, is not to clean and sterilize a topic or terrain, but to strengthen us as researchers and authors. It enables our assertions and texts to stand up to external influences, and hence also to the objections and questions of others.

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<sup>4</sup> I have taken over the term 'take care of the research question' as well as the emphasis on the question in general from Zdeněk Konopásek.

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