

Introduction to the Symposium *Remembering Prague Spring 1968*

In the year of the 50th anniversary of the Czechoslovak reform process of 1968, the *Czech Sociological Review* has invited sociologists and political scientists from various parts of the world to reflect on the place of the Prague Spring in their biographies, both private and academic, and its political significance then and now. With a view to capturing personal memories of those events, the majority of the authors who were invited to contribute to this symposium were born before 1950. The intention was to compose as variegated a set of reflections as could reasonably be expected—representing different countries, different political positions, and different disciplinary traditions: East as well as West, but also East-and-West in the case of émigré scholars; the various currents within the student movement; Marxism, social democracy, and liberalism; social and political theory and empirical research, and so on. The twelve authors who have kindly contributed papers form a fairly heterogeneous group, as each one of them occupies a unique position in relation to the others within the—national or international—political and academic field. Each paper allows the reader to see the Prague Spring in a different light and from a different angle that reflects the specific features of the author's biography. Achieving this kind of pluralism was one of the main goals behind the project for this symposium. But it is also true that the range of perspectives included herein could be much broader yet. For instance, there is no voice from any Czech or Slovak who directly participated in the 1968 reform in Czechoslovakia, as, sadly, these participants, at least among sociologists, are no longer alive. Readers might also rightly miss views from the former Yugoslavia, Russia, China, and the global South. Particularly unfortunate, even though unintended, is the underrepresentation of the voice of female sociologists. It is to be hoped that some of these perspectives will come to be heard in other, similar projects which this year's anniversary is going to produce. Even with due attention to these limitations—for which only the editor is to blame—the present symposium's interest, thanks to the contributing authors, seems to be obvious. The short papers collected here reveal invaluable autobiographical details, many of which might otherwise have been lost to oblivion. They also provide a partial insight into how one or two generations of social scientists experienced the Czechoslovak reform back in the late 1960s as young persons, embroiled more or less (rather more than less, as their autobiographic notes indicate) in the social and cultural upheavals of the time; and how the same authors see those events, and what followed, fifty years later.

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The seven and something months of reform communist rule in Czechoslovakia between January and August 1968, known as the Prague Spring, is one of the most critical periods in the history of Czechs and Slovaks in the 20th century. This was the unique moment when the Communist Party ruling the country embarked, though not without hesitation, internal divisions, and much clumsiness, on a serious effort to transform the Soviet-style authoritarian regime into a political system in which socialism would enter an alliance with democracy and certain elements of market economy. This Czechoslovak project to create, as the famous slogan went, 'socialism with a human face' received wide international attention. Czechoslovakia became the target of a massive wave of public sympathy in many countries after 21 August 1968, when it was invaded by the armies of the Soviet Union and four other Warsaw Pact member states. But neither this sympathy abroad nor the non-violent resistance of the population to the occupiers at home was able to change the course of events. The reformers were defeated and the new political arrangement, known under the euphemistic label of 'normalisation', soon became one of the most hard-line communist regimes in the Soviet-dominated part of Europe.

Produced by mutually reinforcing processes of cultural, social, and political liberalisation on a scale rarely seen in other countries of the Soviet bloc, the Prague Spring was an extraordinary moment in the history of communism in Eastern Europe. But its reformist aspirations were not unique among the Soviet satellite states and its outcomes were modest. Rather than signalling the dawn of a new form of socialism, it entered the history textbooks, jointly with the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 and Poland's Solidarity movement of 1980–1981, as one of the major crises of socialism in the Soviet bloc. Viewed from this angle, the significance that the Prague Spring has acquired is negative: its failure contributed to the ultimate falsification of the political hopes associated with Eastern European communism. For some authors, the defeat of the Czechoslovak reform project was the decisive test and the last one that was needed. The import of the Prague Spring was fleshed out by the British historian Tony Judt (who in the 1980s learned Czech to be able to follow Czechoslovak political developments [Judt 2010]) as follows:

Alexander Dubček and his Action Program were not a beginning but an end. Never again would radicals or reformers look to the ruling Party to carry their aspirations or adopt their projects. Communism in Eastern Europe staggered on, sustained by an unlikely alliance of foreign loans and Russian bayonets: the rotting carcass was finally carried away only in 1989. But the soul of Communism had died twenty years before: in Prague, in August 1968. [Judt 2005: 447]

This commentary is typical of what perhaps became the dominant interpretation of the Prague Spring after 1989: the suppression of the Czechoslovak reform project not only demonstrated to all the actual or potential communist reformers

in Eastern Europe the futility of their endeavours, but it also provided proof to the Western Left that the state-socialist systems would never become the embodiment of the ideal of a just and humane political order superior to Western liberal democratic-cum-capitalist societies. But could the Czechoslovak experience also falsify the prospects for a democratic-socialist transformation in the West (which has in the meantime expanded to include much of the former East)? Obviously, the year 1968 in Czechoslovakia had little relevance in this respect because of the widely different political, economic, and cultural contexts.

It would be incorrect to submit the Prague Spring, a historical process with its own temporal duration and dynamics, to just the kind of retrospective summary evaluation that is exemplified in the quote from Tony Judt. To many observers, the significance of the events may have been very different as they were unfolding and after the entire process came to an end, becoming one discrete part of the past among others. That is why it is particularly important to seek the voices of contemporaries.

Among those contemporaries in the West for whom the Prague Spring could have held, at least in theory, a special appeal, student activists occupied a foremost place. Although Czechoslovak students were not the leaders of the reform process (this role was reserved for the officials of the Communist Party), they were important actors in the social mobilisation that led up to and down from the Prague Spring. But it has been justly noted that, in their political outlooks, the student movements in the West and the East were two very different worlds [Rupnik 2008]. Both sides considered their counterparts behind the Iron Curtain as somewhat naive and not up to the challenges they were confronting. The self-complacency of most reformers in Prague, the leaders of the student movement included, and their dismissive attitude towards the anti-system revolt in Western countries was one of the mistakes of the Czechoslovak reform movement that the dissident political scientist Petr Pithart exposed in the scathingly critical book he wrote in the late 1970s ([Pithart 1980]; to this day, this excellent book has not been translated into English).

It was the novelist Milan Kundera who expressed this attitude of knowing better than almost anyone in the West with an unparalleled clarity in his retrospective comparison of the Paris student revolt of 1968 and the Prague Spring. Kundera not only insisted that the Czechoslovak reform was deeply different from Western protest movements, but he even accused the student protesters in Paris (and, by implication, elsewhere in the West) of 'revolutionary lyricism', a derogatory label he had coined to characterise the political fanaticism of the Stalinist period:

Since today's Western Left defines its goal as a *socialism in freedom*, it is logical that the Prague Spring has become part of its political discourse. I am made aware, more and more often, that the Prague Spring is compared to the Parisian May as if the two events had been analogous and convergent. The truth, however, is not so simple. ... May 1968 was a revolt of youth. The initiative of the Prague Spring was within

the hands of adults who were basing their action on their historical experience and disappointment. Youth, indeed, played an important role during the Spring, but not a predominating one. To claim the contrary is a myth fabricated *a posteriori* with a view to appending the Prague Spring to the pleiad of worldwide student revolts. The Parisian May was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was the explosion of a postrevolutionary skepticism. That is why the Parisian student looked toward Prague with distrust (or rather with indifference) and why the Prague citizen had but a smile for the Parisian illusions, which he considered, rightly or wrongly, as discredited, comical or dangerous.

[Kundera 1980: 558–559; emphasis original]

Did Kundera and other Czechoslovak authors hit the nail on the head with their criticism of the naiveté displayed by the student movement in the West? This is a difficult question, which each of the contemporaries of the 1968 events can best respond individually for himself or herself. Retrospective accounts like those collected in this symposium suggest that not all Western students on the Left were guilty of naive revolutionary lyricism. It is highly problematic to claim, as Kundera does, that the Prague Spring was the work of sceptical adults resistant to the spells of political illusions. Many details in the history of the Czechoslovak reform and its fatal failure indicate rather the contrary. It is thus safer to argue that there were different mixtures of naiveté and realism in the political imaginaries that became influential on both sides of the Iron Curtain, resulting from the particular political experiences each generation had in a given national setting. It is no less true today than fifty years ago that it is dialogue, rather than self-enclosure, that makes it possible for people with different socialisation histories to get over their respective blind spots and mutual ignorance.

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The contributors to this symposium were invited to provide an autobiographical statement connecting their personal memories of the political developments of the year 1968 with a particular focus on the Prague Spring. This autobiographical story, such was the underlying idea, would guide the writers towards reflecting on the significance of the Prague Spring for their own intellectual and political development or for the development of their discipline. The following questions accompanied the invitation to participate and were intended to help their thoughts about the subject to proceed in certain directions:

1. Did the reform process in Czechoslovakia and its suppression by Warsaw Pact armies change your political positions? Did it have any effect on your development as a sociologist? How would you characterise the overall significance of the Prague Spring for you?

Alan Sica and Stephen Turner have said of the 1968 generation: 'We believe this generation of students lived a pedagogical and cultural experience that distinctly separated them from those who came just before and those who followed a few years later.' [Sica and Turner 2005: xi] Whether you belong to this particular

cohort or not, what place did the Prague Spring take in your pedagogical and cultural (as well as political) experience of the year 1968?

2. Generalisations are usually dangerous, but would you say that the Prague Spring and its tragic outcome had some lasting effect on the political sensitivities of sociologists (in the West / in Eastern Europe / in your country or region) after 1968? Did this change in political sensitivities leave any stamp on sociology's substantive interests?

3. The 'events of 1968' are sometimes seen as one single series of transformative developments that had as their common denominator the spirit of challenge to the existing authoritarian structures, whether those of Western capitalism or of East European state socialism; these events also signalled an unprecedented cultural shift, which swept across the globe and, sooner or later, reached almost every national society. But one cannot leave completely aside the obvious differences of political context between the events in the West and in the East (liberal democracy x state socialism). Is there anything that, in your opinion, makes the Prague Spring different from the contemporaneous social upheavals in Western countries?

4. How did your perception of the Prague Spring evolve between then and now? Were there other crucial events or experiences in the light of which your view of the Prague Spring changed?

5. Did you have any contact, in the 1960s or later, with the work of the Czech and Slovak intellectuals allied with the Czechoslovak reform process – such as the sociologists Pavel Machonin, Miloš Kaláb, Zdeněk Strmiska, and others, the legal and political theorist Zdeněk Mlynář, the economist Ota Šik, the philosophers Karel Kosík, Radovan Richta, and Ivan Sviták, the historians Alice Teichová and Mikuláš Teich, the literary theorists Eduard Goldstücker, Lubomír Doležel, Petr Steiner, and Květoslav Chvatík, or the writers Milan Kundera and Ludvík Vaculík? Did the work of any of these authors have some influence on your thinking?

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1968 in Hungary

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The year 1968 started with a kind of slight hope. After a year of discussion among leading economists, a so-called 'new economic mechanism' was introduced in Hungary, beginning on 1 January of the year. The tight central control was loosened, the directors of factories were granted the right to take initiative, and prices were allowed to differentiate. Those who still believed in Marx's theory hoped that after the economic reform political reform will follow, since the base determines the superstructure. We (my friends and I) were rather sceptical. After the defeat of the revolution of 1956, the opening for any kind of political freedom seemed to be impossible unless a miracle happened.

In this atmosphere of slight hope and overarching scepticism the miracle did happen: the Prague Spring. The unexpected good news immediately changed our perspective. Even sceptics began to hope. We presupposed that the main cause of our defeat in 1956 was the absence of synchrony. The Polish 'uprising' had already ended by the time our revolution started, and no other 'socialist' country joined us.

The Prague Spring carried the promise that this time it would be different. The idea of 'socialism with a human face' and the possible institutionalisation of this idea in Czechoslovakia revived the hope vested in the reform of 'socialism' in the direction of pluralism and the institutionalisation of personal liberties. In this light one began to believe that our economic reform could also contribute to the transformation of Hungarian society in the spirit of the ideas of the Prague Spring.

This was the last moment of the illusion of intellectuals who were still clinging to the possibility of reforming the 'socialist' system towards a kind of democracy. I would not say that many shared this illusion, yet I and some of my friends still did. Prague became the city of our great expectations. We appreciated even the caution of the Czech and Slovak actors, an attitude very different from ours in 1956. Perhaps, this time, we would succeed.

All of us (I, my friends and other intellectuals in Hungary) followed all the steps, all the ups and downs of the events in Prague, constantly oscillating be-

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tween hope and fear. We clung to any reassuring news coming from there. As in the case of all political daydreams, our hopes surpassed our fears. This confidence in the future lasted until July.

After an Italian tour with friends we finally arrived in Venice at the end of July and decided to stay there for a few days. Yet, already on the first day of our stay posters appeared on the streets of Venice with the news of the concentration of the Soviet army at the Czechoslovakian border. We immediately lost our interest in Venice and Italy, we were terrified, switching from hope to despair. Yet, in a few days the immediate danger seemed to be gone. We were relieved, for the last time.

In between, in May, another story developed in Paris. A new political actor, 'the new left' entered the political stage. As the news and the stories reached Budapest, I immediately became enthusiastically involved in the new political actor not just practically, but also theoretically. My immediate political interest, and desire, clung further to the possibility of change in Eastern Europe in the direction of 'socialism with a human face', but as far as the future in general was concerned I rested my hope more and more on the 'new left'. I was attracted by the idea of the revolutionary transformation of everyday life, I found it a relief to see a 'left' not just independent of a Soviet model, but also hostile to it. I felt great sympathy for the new communities, which were putting emphasis on new human relationships, a new culture, on women's liberation.

I remained an Eastern European in not sharing the new leftist hostility against market or 'consumerism', since I lived in a country without a market and without the possibility to satisfy some elementary human needs—the need for personal freedom included.

These two commitments, one for Prague and the other for Paris, became combined in my mind. I included my new leftism into the project of the Prague Spring, 'socialism with a human face'. The ideas of the revolution of everyday life, of self-determination, of self-management, became constituent parts of my conception of socialism with a human face. I even described my own project and called it the 'great republic'. It was conceived as a 'free' republic, governed by two houses. One house would be constituted by general elections with the participation of several parties. The other should be the house of 'councils'. I presupposed a free market, yet communal proprietors as competitors. Thus I tried to combine 'socialism' (communal property) with political freedom and pluralism, alias 'human face'.

This project was an entirely irrational utopia, whereas the hope that the Soviet regime would 'allow' another kind of 'socialism' to take roots was just an illusion. My project of the 'great republic', like so many similar ones, combined an illusion and a utopia. My utopia lasted longer, while my illusions were soon lost. On 21 August 1968.

When we (György and Maria Márkus, Vilmos Sós and Zádor Tordai) left for the Summer School in Korčula, Yugoslavia, on 14 August, it looked as if the

dangers threatening Czechoslovakia were now over. The theoretical discussions went on as usual, this time mainly about the student movements, and the new left in general. I met friends and made new acquaintances. We were swimming, talking, eating good fish.

On the morning of 21 August I appeared on time at the venue for the morning discussion, as usual. Yet nothing was usual anymore. People gathered in small groups discussing the news, the invasion of the Soviet army and its allies, among them Hungary, into Czechoslovakia. All dreams of reform were over, all illusions were lost, no 'socialism with a human face' seemed to be possible anymore, and we would never see a political change in our life. There remained some 'optimist' expectations about 'negotiations', yet not for me and for my friends. We knew that all was over. Our life was in a sense a deadlock, a mistake. Something else needed to begin. But for whom? And where?

The first question was obvious: what should we do? We should surely express first our solidarity with the Czech and the Slovak people. And we should turn also to the public opinion of democratic people and governments, demanding them to protest. This happened. A text of protest was formulated. All delegations (albeit not all participants) signed the document of general protest. One person after another from all counties came onto the stage to show their personal grief and outrage. A delegate from Czechoslovakia wept on the stage, crying 'all is over, all is over for good'. (Remark: I met him in the early 1990s in Bratislava as the director of a philosophical institute—there are still some happy endings.)

After having signed the common declaration, we, five Hungarians, decided that this was not enough, given that our own country had also participated in the military action. We must protest as citizens of this country against the action of our own country. Thus, we formulated a protest declaration of our own. It was not an easy task, for we needed to adopt the position of 'socialism with a human face', of an illusion we just lost. After signing our own text we offered it to France Press, and they published it the next day.

We decided to leave the Summer School immediately and return to Hungary by the first train. We expected imprisonment or at least the loss of our jobs. At this time, however, the punishment was less serious (loss of passports etc.). They waited another 5 years, until the death of György Lukács, to punish us.

Whatever happened, the so-called 'Korčula declaration' became regarded as the first open protest against the Kádár regime since 1957. It went down as such in the chronicle of the history of the Hungarian opposition. Not just because it was a protest, not because of its text, but because it was offered to a 'bourgeois agency', the enemy of the Hungarian government. This counted as a public rebellion.

The life of the members of our group, already then the 'Budapest School', changed immediately. And so did the life and the attitude of several other Hungarian intellectuals. Until August 1968 we were system critics, but by far not an opposition. The economist who worked out the 'new economic mechanism' addressed not only party members, but, by definition, also party officials. Many of

the intellectual critics of the system courted also Czech and Slovak communist leaders, functionaries, such as Alexander Dubček, encouraging them to initiate and to introduce common political reforms.

After August 1968, at least in Hungary, former system critics were split. The majority accepted the status quo, as they abandoned all hopes for reforms. A small minority chose, under the same conditions, another path. They also abandoned all hope, yet precisely because of this they also abandoned any kind of loyalty to the system. They became the opposition.

The activity of the self-organised opposition in Hungary began by distributing and signing declarations, protesting against the repression of Czechoslovak intellectuals after August 1968, and making it public outside Hungary. This was the beginning of a development that continued with the emerging samizdat culture, the establishment of a second, alternative 'public sphere'. Thus, August 1968 became the cemetery of the last remains of legitimacy of the Hungarian communist regime.

Personal Notes on Story and History

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In the winter of 1956 I had the threatening feeling that I could be destroyed. I was of pre-school age, I was playing in the garden on the outskirts of Budapest, when looking through the fence I noticed that a tank was approaching on the street. A soldier stood on the top with a machine gun, looking around suspiciously. My friends were hiding in small hastily dug 'family bunkers' in their courtyards, as most of the family houses in the neighbourhood had no basement. We didn't even have a bunker, although passing time might have been much more interesting in one, in spite of the wet and stale air. I had a newborn sister, and she occupied the adults' attention. I was paralysed by the glance of the soldier, I couldn't move. - Stand up, don't slouch, and slowly walk over here, said my father, who looked outside on hearing the rumbling noise. I did so, and soon after my father picked me up, and I waved airily after the rolling tank.

In the elementary school I learned the norms of competition and solidarity. I learned my place in the hierarchy (not dumb but lazy), and I got accustomed to a sort of 'split talk'. 'Don't breathe a word about it in the school', this was a frequent phrase in family talks. There are divisions between the private and public everywhere, but probably there were too many themes for us to keep to ourselves in those years. Not only that the 'Christ resurrected' graffiti had been written on the walls by Aunt Petrás; not only that the next-door neighbour had an air-gun that had been smuggled in from 'Czehsko'; and not only the opinion of my father that his boss was a big zero in engineering and had the party to thank for his career. But also that we wore the national cockade on 15 March. The situation was ambivalent: remembering the 1848 revolution was an important part of the ideological arsenal, but the authorities did not like to see too many cockaded youngsters on the streets. So we put the cockade on our shirt—and stayed at home. The public and the private were separated not only by style (one was more ceremonial and empty and the other more intimate). They were separated according to topics as well, and we were not supposed to talk about public issues. We might have had our opinion, but we kept it to ourselves. Or—I suspect—more frequently we didn't form an opinion on important issues because the discrepancy was frustrating and because it was better to stay on the safe side. We got

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accustomed to it and the important things happened in private life anyway: hanging around with friends.

In the autumn of 1968 several rumours were in the air in Hungary concerning the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and allied troops. Reputedly, the Hungarian leadership tried to mediate up until the last moment in order to avoid the occupation. Supposedly, the Hungarian soldiers were forbidden to shoot unless they came under armed attack. Allegedly, when villagers saw the troops heading towards the border, they went into the stores and bought up salt and sugar, remembering that these had been the most precious products during the war. But all these were rumours, neither exact information, nor opinions. The official version that the occupation was friendly assistance to an imperilled fraternal country was not widely believed. Our math teacher—a charismatic person—set aside the curriculum and started to talk about the events. He said that the day before he was passionately arguing with his university student son and probably we were also interested in his opinion. We were interested indeed, plus we could avoid doing school lessons. His major point was that the Hungarian participation in the intervention was regrettable but unavoidable. Without it, our economic reform could have been endangered. (The Hungarian new economic mechanism had been discussed and prepared for years and was eventually introduced in 1968.) Our teacher's conclusion was not far from the official version, but it was a personal opinion and it broke through the bars of the 'split talk'.

In the spirit of the new economic mechanism the curriculum of the Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences was reorganised. The need for real knowledge as opposed to ideology was the core motive. New disciplines—sociology among others—were introduced. We read Max Weber and Karl Polányi, we participated in field research, and the mood was enthusiastic. My very first research experience was fieldwork for András Hegedüs. He happened to be one of the few Hungarian intellectuals who protested against the occupation of Czechoslovakia. He certainly knew what he was doing, as he had been a devoted prime minister in the dark 1950s. In the 1960s, however, he played a new, progressive role in the rebirth of sociology and in the debates about the reform. By the early 1970s he had lost his academic positions and was becoming a lonely dissident. His more recent reputation, however, survived and local leaders in the countryside were very cooperative interviewees when they learned that I had worked with him. Anyway, the clouds of dogmatic counter-reform already gathered in high politics and could be felt everywhere. Everywhere, except for the university—I thought, but I proved to be naïve.

Organisations have their own good and bad traditions. The bad tradition of our university was that scapegoats were produced among graduate students from time to time. Besides a diploma, everyone got a review, based mostly on aspects of political loyalty. Those who got a bad record couldn't hope for a good job. I received a bad review and in spite of high research ambitions I got a job on the periphery of the academic world—I started to work as an assistant archivist.

My colleagues were interesting—quite a few ‘fifty-sixers’ landed there—but the job was boring.

What remained were the frequent meetings with friends. There were lectures and debates in private apartments, discussing the writings of István Bibó, Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, and other analysts, dreamers, and proclaimers of a more humanitarian society. We also read extended reviews of the contributions of Pavel Machonin and Lubomír Brokl to *Československá společnost*¹ (together with other pieces), a few manuscript copies of which in Hungarian were circulating, because we were eager to learn the facts about our societies.

My marginalisation lasted for three years and at the very end of the third year I got an offer to return to the university within the frame of a programme to renew the sociology curriculum. A three-year period is relatively short, but when you are in it, you don’t know how long it will last. So I started to teach at the university with concentrated effort and to organise my own empirical research, when political history seemed to intervene again.

At the end of 1979 a protest wave rose up among Hungarian intellectuals in response to the imprisonment of the Charter 77 activists. One of the declarations protested against the imprisonment of people for their political convictions and asked Kádár to intervene for the release of the prisoners. I agreed and signed the petition. It was not a radical text and more than a hundred of us signed. But the authorities got anxious, they ordered an investigation case by case at workplaces, and some people, mostly journalists, were dismissed.

My hearing was organised in the rector’s office with the participation of the rector and another university leader. It followed the pattern of the good cop–bad cop division of labour. The good cop asked about my motivation (I really disagreed with the arrest of people simply for their views, it reminded me of the 1950s). The bad cop wanted to learn who persuaded me and who brought the declaration into the university circles (I politely refused to answer). They wanted to learn my opinion on other solidarity actions and on the fact that the declarations and lists were presented on Radio Free Europe. They asked if I was ready to dissociate myself from these (I didn’t want to do that, I signed what I did, and anyway, that was the nature of the news—it is read on the radio). - It would have been much easier if it had been read on Radio Moscow, said the good cop sardonically, and after a break he added, just continue to work, young colleague. The bad cop didn’t add anything.

I learned later that the rector, as a young man, had been an assistant to Imre Nagy at the department of agricultural policy. And I learned something else, too. Before the solidarity declaration I had been nominated to receive a minor teachers’ award, and this proved to be a headache for the leadership. It was one thing

¹ Machonin, P. et al. 1969. *Československá společnost*. (Czechoslovak society). Bratislava: Epona.

that they didn't fire me, but getting a reward at that time sounded like a silly provocation. So at the last minute they nominated another young colleague, a party member. For sure, he had extra information about antecedents and circumstances. Suffice it to say that he refused to accept the reward.

I was a kid in 1956 and a teenager in 1968. I experienced the events and gained deep impressions, but history somehow swept over our heads; it didn't trigger my personal decisions.

After 1956, bloody revenge was followed by a long period of soft dictatorship. After 1968, less bloody but wide cadre changes occurred, and then a long period of bald and hard dictatorship followed. The worker councils of 1956 and the 1968 experiment of socialism with a human face failed, it is true. But did the need for a society with a human face fail, as well?

There is little doubt that the civil rights movement and the democratic opposition grew out of the experiences and failures of 1956 and 1968. The transformers (dreamers and pragmatists alike) absorbed these experiences. It is a rare historical moment when failure turns to success, and when dreamers acquire not only symbolic but real political power. It is true, however, that the influence of the dreamers, their consensus with the technicians of power proved to be temporary and disappeared into the stomach of pragmatist times. In the coexistence of dreamers and pragmatists, dreamers are more vulnerable and deserve support. The nature of pragmatist politics has been well described by critical elite studies and not much room for illusion is left. However, that is what we can learn from experience, that one should be careful with social dreams as well. Despite the signs of solidarity, the utopia of society with a human face may be expecting too much from human nature. It deserves the critical mirror of sociological observation as much as pragmatist power elites do.

When things are looking blue, and the outlook is not promising, the Hungarians say 'things stand Czech' (csehül állnak a dolgok). I couldn't trace the etymology of this saying, which most likely goes back to historical times. But half a century after the failing hopes of the Prague Spring, this wording seems to be generally applicable again.

The Prague Spring as Seen from Romania

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I (VT) was born on 4 July 1951 into a revolutionary family. Both my parents fought in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. My father, Leonte Tismaneanu (né Tisminetsky), lost his right arm in the battle on the River Ebro when he was 24. My mother, Hermina Tismaneanu (née Marcusohn), a medical school student, was a nurse in the International Hospital. They were Stalinist internationalists, and intensely and honestly believed in Soviet anti-fascism. After the defeat of the Spanish Republic, they went, via France, as political refugees to the USSR. My two sisters were born there—Victoria in Kuybyshev (now Samara) in November 1941, and Rodica in Moscow in April 1944. My family returned to Romania in February 1948. My mother, who in the meantime had graduated from Moscow Medical School No. 2, taught paediatrics at the Institute of Medicine in Bucharest. My father became a communist ideologue. While in Spain, my mother worked with numerous doctors and nurses, including the Czech communist physician František Kriegel (1908–1979) and the German nurse Erika Glaser, later Wallach (1922–1993). My mother's sister, Cristina Luca (née Bianca Marcusohn in 1916), was a member of the French resistance and headed the intelligence unit of the FTP–MOI (Francs-Tireurs et Partisans–main-d'œuvre immigrée) where she became friends with Artur London (1915–1986) [see Tismaneanu and Stan 2016].

It is their life story and biographical intersections that triggered these thoughts and many other fragments of personal recollections. I (VT) would say from the very beginning that even if my father was expelled from the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP) because of his critical comments about the Romanian Stalinist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, he remained, until his very end, in February 1981, a true believer and a Marxist. My mother's story, on the other hand, was different: her infatuation with communism ended in 1952–1953, during the anti-Semitic campaigns in the USSR and in the Soviet Bloc. She had studied under the guidance of some of the accused doctors and could not accept the lunatic charges ('attempts to poison Soviet leaders.')

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Such was the family context in which I (VT) grew up and shaped myself as a young student/future intellectual. I learned a lot from my parents and their friends about the history of communism, but I also filtered through my own head and feelings some of the Cold War's major intellectual and political battles. Discussions at home were quite frank, although I disagreed with my father on the overall interpretation of Leninism. But the books that influenced me the most, during my Romanian adolescence and student years, were Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and Raymond Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. Their ideas, as much as others, played a decisive role in my formation. Initially, I was attracted, like so many of my generation, to neo-Marxist or humanist Marxist theories, including the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory. Later, I realised that revisionist Marxism was just another theoretical dead end, an illusion with no real chance of changing the existing despotic systems. Books such as those mentioned above and many others were circulating clandestinely in Romania. I read *The Gulag Archipelago* in French translation. I read Nikolai Berdyaev's book on the origins of Russian communism in French, I read Orwell's *1984* in English.

The Prague Spring of 1968 played an important role in my family's and the Romanian communist regime's dynamics alike. The analysis that I apply today to the two totalitarianisms of the 20th century is inspired by professional and moral reasons. If there were a kind of predestination or a curse to deny the different views between generations, humanity would be forever damned to repeat Cain's gesture against his brother, Abel. As Victor Hugo once had it: 'Un éternel Caïn tue à jamais Abel.'

In the late 1950s, my father was not a member of the local Muscovite faction, but the RWP's representative to a newly established (September 1958) journal (in Russian and most languages *Problems of Peace and Socialism* (PPS), in English *World Marxist Review*, in French *La Nouvelle revue internationale*) based in Prague. So my father lived there for a while, between April and September 1958, rarely travelling back home to Romania. But then, in September, when the first issue of the journal came out, to which he contributed as a roundtable participant, the head of the Central Committee's international department (Ghizela Vass) told him, without further explanations, that his trips to Prague were over. In the aftermath, he was expelled from the Party following a sinister investigation. I (VT) remember vividly because I was seven years old and had just entered first grade, and many of the local nomenclature's children were my fellow pupils. I remember the huge amount of stress we were all living with.

On the Prague journal and the RWP's role in it there are still many things to be said. In his memoirs, former Romanian communist politician and chief of the Romanian party's international affairs department in the late 1960s, Paul Niculescu-Mizil (1923–2008) talks about the battles between the exponents of the 'polycentric' direction (to employ Palmiro Togliatti's formula) and those of Soviet hegemonism (very often small Latin-American parties, but also Hungarian,

Greek, Bulgarian, and Middle Eastern communists). In many respects, the Prague experience had played an essentially formative role in the making of a 'party intelligentsia' (what I once called the party intellectuals, following the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectuals') within the ideological apparatus of the CPSU [Tismaneanu 1991].

A book owed to Mikhail Gorbachev's former foreign policy advisor, Anatoly C. Chernyaev, which came out from Penn University Press [Chernyaev 2000] acknowledges such formative experience and influence. Members of the *PPS's* editorial board included not just Chernyaev, but also Ivan Frolov (secretary of the ideology during the heyday of glasnost), Georgy Shakhnazarov (also, one of Gorbachev's close advisors and president of the Soviet Association of Political Sciences between 1975 and 1991), or Fedor Burlatsky (journalist and early advocate of perestroika). As a matter of fact, this connection between Gorbachev and the group of ideologues tied to the Prague journal has been stressed by British political scientist and Gorbachev's biographer Archie Brown [see Brown 1997].

What we, the authors of this essay, want to emphasise here is the significance of this anti-Stalinist trend which started in Prague in 1958, and that in the late 1960s, there was already a wind of intellectual awakening blowing through the Soviet team's curtains, mostly linked and the result of the liberalising and revisionist ideas connected with the Prague Spring (and Eurocommunism in general). Years later, former Czechoslovak ambassador in Washington, DC, and speechmaker of Charter 77, Rita Klímová (herself born in Romania in 1931; she passed away in Prague in 1993), would tell me (VT) about Mikhail Gorbachev's role in catalysing and enabling the revolutionary transformations of 1989: 'He was not a sufficient condition, but he was definitely a necessary one.' Rita had been married to Zdeněk Mlynář (1930–1997), one of the top ideologues of the Prague Spring and Gorbachev's former roommate during his law studies in Moscow.

It is important to mention that the *Problems of Peace and Socialism* journal had been a home for many other stars of the world communist movement. Its first editor-in-chief was Aleksei Rumiantsev, member of the CPSU's Central Committee (CC), CC department head, and, in the 1980s, head of the Soviet Political Science Association. More should be said about Jean Kanapa (1921–1978), the first French representative on the editorial board, then head of the foreign department of the FCP, including during the Czechoslovak experiment of socialism with a human face. It is true that, during the 1950s, Kanapa, a brilliant graduate of the famous *École normale supérieure* had been an adamant Stalinist. On the other hand, documents pertaining to the history of FCP—CPSU relations prove that in 1968, Kanapa, in his capacity as head of the French party's CC for foreign affairs, was ardently in favour of the Dubček line [Kanapa 1984].

When the Prague Spring occurred I (VT) was enthused, like many of my generation, attracted by the very idea of 'socialism with a human face', by the idea that totalitarianism is not eternal and that freedom can be achieved in a regime like the one we had in Romania. French and Italian communist newspapers were circulating in Bucharest and other Romanian cities and many of us

were listening to Radio Free Europe's intense coverage of political and cultural dynamics in Czechoslovakia. Officially, Nicolae Ceaușescu supported the Prague Spring and, during his visit to Czechoslovakia in early August he emphatically proclaimed his pro-Dubček stance. But then, in August 1968, the invasion of Czechoslovakia took place, followed by the restoration of the paralysing order of Soviet-style ideological despotism, the 'normalisation' imposed from and by the Kremlin, repression against those who had been supporters of Alexander Dubček's democratising project, the new thaw, Jan Palach's self-immolation in Prague in January 1969, Ceaușescu's handling of the so-called national scare (in fact an unreal one) of Soviet intervention in order to boost his own obscene cult of personality, the gradual fascisation of Romanian communism, and so on. After all this, it became impossible for me to embrace the communist illusion any longer. With 1968 and what followed came my own apostasy. In fact, as Adam Michnik often emphasised, the crushing of the Prague Spring symbolised the end of revisionist illusions about reform from the top down. This was also spelled out in conversations I (VT) had over the years with major figures of the Prague Spring such as Jiří Dienstbier, Antonín J. Liehm, and Ivan Sviták.

My father fully embraced Nikita Khrushchev's theses, including the ones that referred to Stalin's 'cult of personality', but he never broke with the grand revolutionary illusion of Marxism. He had been expelled from the RWP in 1960 for 'factionalism' and for having discussed so-called 'unprincipled issues' in private. In the words of former Romanian communist prime minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer (1902–2000), he had swum against the tide. We had numerous contradictory talks, my father and I, up until 1970, and then we both decided it would be wiser to avoid issues that might lead to an open conflict. It became obvious among my colleagues, many of them from the same social strata, that the system was irredeemably lost, that nothing good would come of it. The last hope for internal rejuvenation had been the Prague Spring.

Our (VT & MS) point of view on the meanings and overtones of the year 1968 in Romania is in tune with the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, which I (VT) chaired in 2006 [Tismaneanu and Stan 2018]. A number of conceptual issues were tied to the efforts of Marxist revisionists to liberalise the communist systems and to bring back the individual as the focal point of the philosophical reflection inspired by Karl Marx. A liberal wind had swept in in 1968, a feeling that everything was possible, that the social imaginary can finally be set free. With hindsight, sure, it was all just a big illusion. But back then neo-Marxist revisionism contributed tremendously to the final dissolution of the frozen universe of both totalitarian and post-totalitarian bureaucracies.

Our (VT & MS) first thesis on 1968 is that there was a time when many people saw Ceaușescu as an open-minded Marxist, a nationalist communist or even a supporter of socialism with a human face. I (VT) was there, in Bucharest, and had a peculiar family background, coupled with a huge thirst to grasp what was going on. Ceaușescu himself had flirted with this image and many Romanian

intellectuals and technocrats believed in his demagoguery, while foreign observers deemed him to be an East-European David confronting the big and scary Soviet Goliath. This was the narrative in 1968. I remember how during an Anex Paris conference in 1987, *Le Monde* journalist Amber Bouzougou came up with the best formula to describe reactions to Ceaușescu in the Western media (*Le Monde, The New York Times, The Guardian*): ‘Cher monsieur, nous nous sommes tous faits eus’ / ‘Dear Sir, you tricked us all!’.

Our second thesis is that Ceaușescu cynically used the crushing of the Prague Spring (the military invasion after 21 August 1968) as an excuse to strengthen his own personality cult. Ceaușescu invented a self-aggrandising mythology in which he occupied the hero’s place, the very symbol of this strong bond between the Party and the people. In 1968, ‘RCP–Ceaușescu–Romania’ became the official slogan. So our thesis is that the origins and the first expressions of this personality cult are not to be found in 1971, as was presumed for many years, but between 1967 and 1968. Gheorghiu-Dej did not benefit from a similar spectacular cult and for sure did not use his image as a propagandistic instrument, but Ceaușescu was something else.

Our third thesis is that Ceaușescu was a deep-rooted, unswerving Bolshevik. Neither he nor his camarilla ever wanted to liberalise or democratise the political system in Romania. The narrative put forth by nostalgics like Paul Niculescu-Mizil (quoted above), but also by former foreign minister Ștefan Andrei (1931–2014) et al., is that during 1966, 1967, and 1968 a reformist phenomenon took hold inside the Party, and from the top down. Even Ion Iliescu has tried to advocate this thesis on various occasions, including in a dialogue with VT [Iliescu and Tismaneanu 2004]. The authors of this essay totally reject this thesis. Even in its less repressive phase, the system was structurally opposed to any idea of Rechtsstaat (rule of law) and market economy. *And this is precisely where the significant difference between the Prague Spring and the pseudo-reformist masquerade in Bucharest lies.*

Marxist revisionism was an intellectual and political trend based on a revolt against the bureaucratic Leviathan of Stalinism. The pivotal elements of Marxist revisionism were anti-authoritarianism, resistance to bureaucratic centralism, rejection of statist all-embracing domination, and repudiation of dogmatic controls over the life of the mind. Revisionism’s logic would eventually transcend the initial strategy, and therefore, it would become the opposite of Bolshevism [Tigris 1977].

As a local and global phenomenon, East European Marxist revisionism developed in the aftermath of Stalin’s death and was different from the late 19th–early 20th century reformism associated with *The Preconditions of Socialism* by Eduard Bernstein, Friedrich Engels’s former secretary, a person of immense reputation and legitimacy within the socialist movement. Our focus here is on the Marxist revisionism that came about in Eastern and Central Europe and found many congeners and partners in dialogue among the apostates from official Marxism in France and the United States, especially after the Hungarian

Revolution of 1956. Its main proponents were György Lukács (1885–1971) and his Budapest school, Karel Kosík (1926–2003), Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), and the Praxis group in Yugoslavia.

There is a neo-Marxist illusion at the basis of Marxist revisionism and it is partially inspired by Sartrean existentialism, Ernst Bloch, Henri Lefebvre, and Antonio Gramsci. The first element of this illusion was that the system could be reformed from the top down, that people could place their hopes in the coming of an enlightened leader (such as Imre Nagy, Dubček, or Gorbachev). A second element anticipated that an enlightened leadership would push for reforms, which would eventually lead to the liberalisation and then the democratisation of the system as a whole.

After 1956, it became clear that reclaiming young Marx's libertarian tradition would never work with but against the profitocratic oligarchy. This became pretty evident during those ten days of liberalisation initiated by Imre Nagy in 1956. Starting in 1960, Marxist revisionism turned anti-Bolshevik and ended ultimately as non-Marxism and anti-Marxism. The Prague Spring had been the 'swan song' of this revisionist illusion and the 'dialectics of the concrete' (Karel Kosík) vanished under the tracks of the Warsaw Pact armies. However, this Marxist revisionism did blow up and it corroded the original apologetic discourse. It instead inserted a counter-narrative, it rehabilitated themes such as subjectivity and negativity, and it brought back the 'person' as a legitimate subject. At the same time, it opened the gates to a post-Marxist vision, and, in some cases (such as Leszek Kołakowski), an anti-Marxist *Weltanschauung*.

After 1968, Adam Michnik came to the conclusion that the system cannot be reformed from the inside. He therefore argued that 'there was no such thing as socialism with a human face, but totalitarianism with broken teeth' [Michnik 1998]. In the aftermath of the Prague Spring, Polish revisionists asked themselves: 'What is to be done?' Some of them wanted to flee the bloc, some wanted to stay and oppose the system in Poland. Michnik's solution was called the new evolutionism or the civil society project. So, in many respects, the defeat of Marxist revisionism was just the prelude to the birth of the social movements that would climax in Solidarność. In Romania, on the other hand, the crushing of the Czechoslovak experiment became a legitimising tool for Ceaușescu's growing cult of personality and an argument for many intellectuals to endorse the RCP's 'patriotic' rhetoric. Even a former political prisoner, later the country's most prominent dissident, novelist Paul Goma, joined the RCP.

Following the tragedy of August 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the ideology of human rights became increasingly acknowledged as the fundamental basis for the new course adopted by the Czechoslovak opposition. Václav Havel was never a Marxist, his philosophical stances were influenced by Jan Patočka's school of thought, hence by phenomenology. Charter 77 brought together thinkers and activists of various orientations, existentialists, neo-Marxists, disenchanted socialists, and classic liberals. For many of the chartists, the key idea was to 'live in

truth' and not to add to the all-pervasive lie of the existing political arrangement [Riese 1979].

The Prague Spring went beyond the communist system in Eastern Europe and begot a trans-European dimension, more often than not associated with youth revolts across the globe in 1968. I (VT) vividly remember those passionate hours of listening to Radio Free Europe's analyses on student movements in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France. I also remember all the broadcasts that followed the invasion by the armies of the Warsaw Pact. And it is RFE where I first heard of Leszek Kołakowski and the Polish professors who defied Gomułka's regime and stood in solidarity with the rebelling students at the University of Warsaw in March 1968.

The Prague Spring had been anticipated by a series of events and developments of crucial significance: Khrushchev's sudden ouster in October 1964; the persecution of intellectual dissenters (the Sinyavsky–Daniel trial in 1966); the Sino-Soviet Split and the Vietnam War. In Romania, there was the Declaration of April 1964, known as the document that epitomised Gheorghiu-Dej's policy of autonomy from the Kremlin. The Ninth Congress (in July 1965) of the Romanian party did nothing but confirm this political ambivalence: on the one hand, openness and external autonomy (close to Titoism); on the other, Ceaușescu's and his faithful camarilla's increasingly tighter grip on power. The dialectics of de-Stalinisation and de-Sovietisation were thus in full swing in Romania in the mid-1960s, and the winning course only became evident after August 1968.

What was going on in Czechoslovakia during the same period? After an ambiguous de-Stalinisation process, there were all sorts of political, social, and cultural crises. The Czechoslovak Writers' Union Conference in the spring of 1967 marked the break-up between the intellectuals and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). Many other acts of defiance added to the general picture. The conflict between Czech and Slovak communists led to the collapse of unity at the top. In January 1968, Dubček became First Secretary and, in a matter of months, what had started as a small programme for the rationalisation of socialism turned out to be a radical strategy for institutional reform. The Polish and East-German leaders genuinely panicked and pressured Moscow to take pre-emptive action. All the archival materials suggest that the intervention was intended to bring an end to this experiment in democratic socialism. The invasion was therefore triggered by the old and ossified Leninist bureaucracies' fear that the Czechoslovak example would be contagious and would eventually lead to the collapse of the communist empire altogether.

In Romania, despite some friendly statements about the new leadership in Prague, Ceaușescu retained absolute power. The myth of the Communist Party's 'leading role' was regarded as sacrosanct dogma. Only a few excerpts from the 'Action Programme of the CPC' of 5 April 1968 were published in Romanian. The RCP tried as much as possible to avoid delivering news about the abolition of censorship and the emergence of independent political and cultural associations

in Czechoslovakia. When Ceaușescu decided to rehabilitate Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu (1900–1954), he did it not to condemn the old practices of the Securitate, but to consolidate his own dominant position within the party. The hope for change was insidiously manipulated by the ideological apparatus of the Romanian Communist Party.

I (VT) was almost seventeen years old when a group of intellectuals from Prague published 'The Two Thousand Words' manifesto, while the Communist Party in Bucharest chose to ignore the call for the deep and meaningful pluralisation of the system. A break with Leninism, the ideology behind the providential role of the single party, was never in the pipeline in Bucharest.

Ceaușescu's speech of 21 August 1968 championed defiance of Soviet imperialism only to enhance his international profile as a courageous maverick. In reality, condemning the invasion was for the Romanian leader a way of rejecting the monopolistic ambitions of the Kremlin. For Ceaușescu, any genuine reform amounted to 'right-wing deviation'. The failure of the Prague Spring became his favourite alibi whenever there was a need to justify the myth of the indestructible unity of the party, leader, and nation. Almost a year after the defeat of the Prague Spring, a world communist conference was held in Moscow. The Chinese, Albanian, North Korean, and Yugoslav communist parties boycotted it. The leaders of the Italian and Spanish parties, Enrico Berlinguer (1922–1984) and Santiago Carrillo (1915–2012), openly distanced themselves from the Soviet concept of 'limited sovereignty' and condemned, once again, the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

In a way, this moment signalled the birth of 'Eurocommunism'. Ceaușescu was quite cautious in his intervention. For him, the important lesson was not to engage in any attempt at a less stifling form of socialism, without remaining a mere vassal of the Kremlin.

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Hopes and Tragedy: The Prague Spring from a Polish Perspective

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The Czechoslovak events of 1968 had a very important impact on the political developments in the former socialist states for two reasons. First, they demonstrated that a peaceful transformation of the communist regime—contrary to the dominant view of Western Sovietologists—was possible. Under the leadership of the reformist wing of the Communist Party, Czechoslovakia started what could have become the peaceful transition from party dictatorship to liberal democracy with a strong socialist orientation. ‘The Action Programme’, announced on 5 April 1968, while reiterating the principle of the leadership of the Communist Party, proclaimed the intention of the party reformers to change the political system in the direction of parliamentary democracy [Remington 1969: 88–137]. Considering the broad support enjoyed by the party, this was not unrealistic. Historians of the Prague Spring emphasised the historically novel nature of the reform programme, which went far beyond all earlier proposals of communist reformers [Golan 1971, 1973; Skilling 1976]. The fact that the reform movement was crushed by the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces does not prove the impossibility of a peaceful change of the communist system. It only shows that such change was impossible as long as the Soviet Union remained under the rule of orthodox communists with a neo-Stalinist orientation. Twenty years later—when Gorbachev’s reformers replaced the old guard in the Kremlin—this peaceful transformation became a reality.

The British historian Archie Brown, in his biography of Mikhail Gorbachev, emphasised the impact of the Prague Spring on the generation of ‘shestidesyatniki’—young communists for whom the period of the early 1960s was the most important political experience [Brown 1996: 40]. Since the future reformist leader of the USSR belongs to this generation, it is evident that indirectly the Czechoslovak reform movement had an impact on his political views. Brown mentions also the friendship between Gorbachev and Zdeněk Mlynář during their university years in Moscow [Brown 1996: 30]. It can only be speculated to what degree the Prague Spring influenced the thinking of the last Soviet leader and through such influence made an impact on the ultimate demise of the Soviet communist regime.

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This was yet to come. The military intervention of 21 August 1968 had a profound and deeply negative impact on the political situation in the Soviet bloc and in the communist movement outside it. The tragic end of the Prague Spring weakened the reformists in the socialist states and isolated the communist parties of the Soviet bloc from their allies in Western Europe who—with very few exceptions—condemned the intervention. The intervention had a profound impact on the reformist tendencies in the countries under Soviet domination, particularly in Poland. Prior to 1968, many reformers believed that if they only avoided the rapid collapse of the political regime (as it happened in Hungary) and maintained political control over events, gradual peaceful change would be feasible. August 1968 destroyed such hopes. Later on—particularly in Poland during the political crisis of 1980–1981—this experience of the Soviet-led intervention in Czechoslovakia was pointed to as the definitive proof that national independence could be endangered if things went too far and too fast.

The tragedy of the Czechoslovak reform movement had, however, a lasting positive effect as well. In the 1970s, it inspired the democratic opposition in Central Europe (particularly the Committee for the Defence of Workers in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia) and indirectly contributed to the success of democracy in 1989. In this, Czechoslovakia's aborted democratization was not in vain.

For Poland, 1968 was a dramatic year as well—but for a very different reason. After the death of Stalin and after the limited departure from Stalinism proclaimed by the new Soviet leadership in 1956, Poland and Czechoslovakia moved in two opposite directions. For reasons of history, Poland was by far better prepared to use the new political opportunities for expanding the scope of political independence and for liberalising the internal political system. Under the leadership of the former political prisoner Władysław Gomułka, the reformist majority of the Polish Central Committee was able to push the country along the path of limited but meaningful liberalisation, free it from the most flagrant aspects of Soviet control, and open up new relations with the West. It was the triumph of political realism over traditional Polish romanticism [Bromke 1967].

With the passing of time, however, the political configuration in Poland gradually changed with a new authoritarian faction emerging within the ruling party. Its trademark was manifest nationalism with elements of antisemitism. The most prominent leaders of this faction were former commanders of the communist underground during the Nazi occupation (particularly the minister of internal affairs general Mieczysław Moczar) and the faction was strongly entrenched in the organs of state security. Its antisemitism was directed mostly against the old guard of pre-war communist cadres, a large part of which had Jewish background. In June 1967, the Six-Day War between Israel and her Arab neighbours provided the nationalistic faction a unique opportunity to launch a political campaign ostensibly directed against alleged 'Zionists' but in fact aimed at the elimination of the best-known reformers from the leadership of the ruling party. In 1968, the anti-Semitic campaign reached its peak. It is at this point

that political fortunes of our two countries went in sharply opposite directions. Among the Polish public—particularly the intelligentsia and students—events in Czechoslovakia were met with enthusiastic support as an indication that reforms within the system could go beyond limits of liberalisation. In reaction to such trends, the hard-liners within the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP)—with at least tacit acceptance offered them by Gomułka—launched a political campaign marked by antisemitism. Among the victims of this campaign were my friends Zygmunt Bauman and Maria Hirszowicz, who after been expelled from their posts at Warsaw University emigrated from Poland.

For me, the events of 1968 had a traumatic impact. My earlier activity in PUWP's reformist wing and my association with the leading reformist philosopher Adam Schaff, whose deputy in directing the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences I had been since 1965, made me suspect in the eyes of the hardliners. My open criticism of antisemitism was met with accusations of an 'anti-Polish' stance. I refused to change my position and survived the purge of 1968 only because when it peaked I was outside Poland (as Simon Professor at the University of Manchester).

My position during the political crisis of 1968 resulted from my earlier political activity. I joined the party at the age of 18, more because of the realisation that the new political order would remain for many decades if not for the rest of my life and that the future of Poland would depend on the way in which the nation would be able to rebuild its life in the political configuration created by the results of the great war. Having come from a family with strong links to the pre-war Polish regime and having played a minor role in the Polish underground during the Nazi occupation (in the distribution of the underground press), I had been motivated more by political realism than by communist dogmas.

In 1956, as a 25-year-old lecturer at the University of Warsaw I became an active participant in the reform movement. In November 1956, I published my most important early political article ('The Crisis of Internationalism') in PUWP's theoretical journal [*Wiatr* 1956], for which I received severe reprimands from Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak critics, who accused me of the most serious political offense: the rejection of the ideological obligation of blind obedience to the Soviet Union. My Czechoslovak critic, Karel Sršeň [1957], emphasised the obligation of communists to fully accept the 'leading role' of the CPSU in the world communist movement, something that I—like all Polish reformers of that period—firmly rejected.

In my 1956 article, I explicitly criticised the Soviet intervention in Hungary as the violation of the principle of sovereignty of the socialist states. At that time it was still possible to express such view on the pages of the main theoretical journal of the party.

In the following years I firmly supported the moderately reformist leadership of Władysław Gomułka, even if it was losing support among a large part of the leftist intelligentsia. I saw no realistic alternative and—until 1968—believed

that this was the best way for Poland in the existing situation of the divided world and the Cold War.

Our experience of 1956 influenced the way in which Polish reformers perceived the then existing situation in the socialist countries. On the one hand, it showed that a deep change in the functioning of the political system was possible, even if opposed by the Soviet leadership. On the other hand, however, it also demonstrated the limits of politically feasible change. For few days in October 1956 we lived in a climate of an imminent threat of Soviet military intervention, which the Poles were ready to oppose with all resources at our disposal. The final outcome—compromise between Polish and Soviet leaders—saved us from a tragedy of the type well remembered in Poland's history.

In the following years the reformist wing of the PУWP underwent a split with its most radical members (mostly from the intellectual milieu) rejecting the very logic of limited reforms. In 1966 Leszek Kołakowski was expelled from the party, a move that led several intellectuals to leave the party in protest. My position was different. Aware of the limits of possible change, I supported the centrist political line of the post-October party leadership.

In the first years after October 1956 Poland remained an isolated island of reformed socialist policy within the Soviet bloc. Gradually things began to change. In the early 1960s reformist ideas began to appear in some other socialist states, particularly in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. When I visited Prague in early 1962, I met the political scientist Zdeněk Mlynář, whose publications on political pluralism reflected a way of thinking that was very close to what has been voiced in Poland by my older friend Stanisław Ehrlich and other reformers. Soon, contacts with Czechoslovak sociologists—particularly with Pavel Machonin—offered me the broad possibility of very interesting exchanges of ideas. In the 1960s five of my books were published in Czechoslovakia, making me one of the trio of Polish sociologists with the closest contacts with Czechoslovak colleagues—along with Zygmunt Bauman and Jan Szczepański. I visited Czechoslovakia frequently, delivering lectures and meeting with reformist intellectuals.

A special field of cooperation I had with Czechoslovak sociologists was military sociology. Since 1958 I was the head of the chair of military sociology in the Military Political Academy in Warsaw—the first such chair in a military academy in the world. In the mid-1960s, at the Klement Gottwald Military Political Academy, a group of sociologists led by colonel Jaromír Cvrček started research and teaching in this field. In the spring of 1967 an international conference of military sociologists from the socialist states took place in Prague. I headed the Polish delegation and presented the key report [*Problémy 1967*]. After the Prague Spring, in which officers from the Gottwald Academy took an active part (and were purged after the intervention), military sociology was dormant in Czechoslovakia for twenty long years.

On the eve of the Prague Spring I had mixed feelings about its perspective. On the one hand, I was impressed by the courageous and intellectually mature

position taken by the Czechoslovak reformers. I wished them all the very best. On the other hand, however, I feared that delayed democratisation in Czechoslovakia would take a too radical direction—particularly in the context of the Soviet retreat from the limited de-Stalinisation of the Khrushchev era.

The military intervention took place when I was vacationing in Yugoslavia. The worst of my predictions came true. I was firmly opposed to the intervention and ashamed of the role Poland played in it. By the end of August I had left my position in the Military Political Academy—a very modest gesture of disapproval for the use of the Polish forces in the intervention.

In the following years my contacts with Czechoslovak sociologists and political scientists gradually withered away. In June 1970 I spent a week in Bratislava at the invitation of the Slovak Political Science Association. It was a dramatic time with my Czech and Slovak colleagues being purged from the party in what was called ‘normalisation’. In the following years I had no contacts with Czechoslovak sociologists and political scientists except when visiting Zdeněk Mlynář during his emigration in Austria.

After the fall of the communist regimes in Central Europe I resumed my frequent visits to Prague and Bratislava, rebuilding my contacts with Czech and Slovak political scientists and sociologists. What I find particularly disturbing is the way in which the experience of 1968 is belittled by a large part of the Czech political and intellectual elite. It is understandable that the radical break with the former regime makes the ‘Action Programme’ and other documents of the Prague Spring look too modest. But it has to be remembered that fifty years ago it was the most far-reaching programme of peaceful democratisation ever presented in a communist state. In my comparative analysis of the democratic transformation of ‘post-communist’ European states I emphasised the lasting impact of the Czechoslovak reform movement of 1968 on long-term change in Central Europe [Wiatr 2006: 53-56]. Like similar events of the past, the Prague Spring can best be understood from a long historical perspective. Fifty years later, it remains one of the most important events of the 20th century.

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The Questions of 1968: Background, Context and Retrospect

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The fiftieth anniversary of the May 1968 events in Paris, and of their less spectacular analogies elsewhere in the West, has attracted worldwide comment and re-evaluation. Much less is said about 1968 in the erstwhile communist world. That part of the story was, admittedly, confined in the main to one country, and came to a more brutal end than anything on the other side of the iron curtain. But closer examinations of the Western 1960s and their sequel have increasingly stressed the limits, illusions and paradoxes of these historical experiences. The protest movements were short-lived; if they had an impact, it was of a very different nature than what they had aspired to, and variations from country to country were much more important than they seemed at the time; neither protagonists nor interpreters came anywhere near an adequate grasp of the world-changing processes at work in the wider environment. Explaining the differences of cultural memory in East and West in terms of relative historical weight will therefore not get us very far. To understand the particular amnesia that has obscured the significance of the Prague Spring, the specific Eastern European version of the *fin-de-siècle* ideological backlash must be taken into account.

The vision of the communist past, imposed by dominant neo-liberal forces during the 1990s, drew on trends apparent within East European dissent from the 1970s onwards. But they were now combined in a more systematic fashion, and in regard to the Prague Spring, this resulted in a threefold uncompromising verdict. The defeat of the reformists was seen as the final proof of an inherent unreformability of communist regimes. Apart from empirical objections to this view, to be discussed below, there is a basic reason for doubt: can any social regime be unamenable to reform of any kind? It is an established fact that no reforms in the history of communism fulfilled their promises, but this does not mean that nothing was ever reformed. A second claim, closely related to the first, was that unorthodox Marxist critiques of the Soviet model, of the kind adumbrated by many revisionist intellectuals between 1956 and 1968, had been invalidated *en bloc* and should give way to opposition on fundamentally different grounds. There is

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no doubt that the origins of this turn were linked to more general disillusionment with Marxian modes of thought during the 1970s. But it is one thing to move beyond Marxism (and the validity of that move is not being questioned), another to dismiss that whole tradition as unworthy of further engagement and suppress its insights. Finally, the idea of a critical attitude to both Cold War alternatives, Eastern and Western, was dismissed as an illusory third way, and replaced by an obvious choice between a successful and a failed model.

In short, the quasi-official view of the Prague Spring closed the book on questions and claimed to rest on uncontroversial facts. The first task of critical reflection is therefore to reinstate the imperative of questioning conventional wisdom.

Crisis, reform and defeat

If the first step towards the invention of the Soviet model was taken in 1917, 1989 saw the beginning of the multiple mutations that put an end to its trajectory. Stalin's death in 1953 divides the time in between into two periods of exactly the same length. The exit from history and especially the rapid collapse in Eastern Europe have—understandably—generated a certain tendency to treat the second period as nothing but a downhill road, paved by more or less serious reformist intentions. The story is of course more complicated. To cut it short, developments between 1953 and 1989 may be described as a changing combination of several processes. The beginning was an unavoidable restructuring after the demise of an autocrat who had become the central institution of his regime. More public and more conflictual later developments overshadowed this initial episode (the changes and power struggles between 1953 and 1956), but it was a crucial prelude to further movement. The shift from an autocratic and massively terroristic version of totalitarianism to an oligarchic and more controlledly repressive one was not a negligible detail. But it called for a more explicit redefinition of the regime's past history and future aims, as well as of its present relations to the capitalist environment (the problem that proved most intractable was the growing presence of another communist great power).

It was not foreordained that this reorientation would take the form that it did through the twentieth party congress in 1956. The de-sacralisation of Stalin sparked a protracted legitimation crisis, which in turn called for damage-limiting and reconsolidating measures. At the same time, attempts were made to push ideological and political change beyond the limits imposed by the Soviet power centre. This was especially pronounced in the East Central European periphery of the Soviet bloc (for a very informative discussion of the background to these developments, see Kolář [2016a]). But there were major differences between the countries in question. While the ruling party in Poland rode out the storm through a settlement that is now—because of later difficulties—not held in high

esteem, but was at the time a significant departure from established patterns, the crisis in Hungary became so explosive that the regime collapsed before reformist policies could be implemented, and some steps in that direction were only taken later, when there was no scope for a reform movement. The Czechoslovak pattern differed from both these cases. Nothing momentous happened in 1956, but as Muriel Blaive [2005] shows in her detailed study of that year in Czechoslovakia, the calm was less untroubled than commonly assumed. A stronger reformist current took shape from the early 1960s onwards, and led to major changes in party leadership and policies at the beginning of 1968. All conjectures about the longer-term perspectives of the Czechoslovak reform project are unavoidably speculative, but the present writer tends to agree with H. Gordon Skilling's diagnosis of an 'interrupted revolution' (Skilling [1976], still the most detailed analysis developed by any Western historian). In other words, it seems likely that the radicalising process would have continued, if it had not been halted by the invasion in August 1968. The claim that the reforms had reached their limits, or met with ultimate systemic obstacles, is if anything more speculative. A closer look at the events of 1968 suggests that the outcome was decided by the geopolitical constitution of the Soviet bloc, i.e. the incompatibility of autonomous reforms on the periphery with the hegemony of the centre, not by any uniform systemic logic. And it may be added that a geopolitical constellation was also a key factor in the momentous reorientation of the centre in the late 1980s. The Soviet Union could no longer sustain two cold wars (with China and the West), with the proven possibility of open war erupting on both fronts, a growing collusion of the two adversaries, and a particularly acute local conflict related to the threats from both sides (Afghanistan).

1968 as a global constellation

After this brief look at the historical background, the next aspect to be considered is the contemporary context, and more specifically the relationship between the Czechoslovak reform movement and the protest movements that shaped the image of 1968 in the West. There are two sides to this question. On the one hand, the mutual disdain of the movements is notorious. Western radicals were consistently dismissive of Czechoslovak reformists, before and after August 1968, and fundamental scepticism was the dominant Czechoslovak response to student activism west of the border (more scathing comments came later, notably from Milan Kundera). Exceptions can be found on both sides, but they did not change the mainstream leftist views. On the other hand, the intellectual currents of the Prague Spring were in many ways related to trends in the West, and some Czechoslovak contributions to international debates reached a broader public through translations. The two books most noticed were Karel Kosík's *Dialectics of the Concrete* [1976 (1963)] and *Civilization at the Crossroads*, a collection of papers on the scientific and technological revolution by Radovan Richta and his collaborators

[Richta et al. 1969]. These two works exemplify the diversity of approaches that emerged within the Czechoslovak context. But as Pavel Kolář [2016b] argues in a recent paper, further exploration of affinities and parallels with Western developments is needed.

At the time, little was done to clarify such international connections. But a very interesting attempt, much less known than it deserves to be, can be found in a short text by Jan Patočka. The Czech title, 'Intelligence a opozice' [Patočka 2006], raises translation problems: the first word can refer to intelligence as a human capacity, to the intelligentsia as a socio-cultural stratum with specific historical characteristics, and to intellectuals as a social group in a more general sense. It seems clear that Patočka had all three meanings in mind. The first version of the text was presented as a lecture in Germany in the late spring of 1968; the longer Czech version seems to have been completed shortly before August 1968, but was not published (in a collection of Patočka's essays) until the spring of 1969, and was then almost immediately withdrawn from circulation. Patočka's aim was to make sense of the contestatory movements animated by intellectuals in general and students in particular. He accepted the idea that a scientific and technological revolution was changing the situation and outlook of the intelligentsia in modern societies, but did not assume that this predetermined a course of action or a view of the world. Rather, he set out to measure the distance between possibilities opened up by the new constellation, and this perspective linked the Czechoslovak experience not only to Western movements, but also to the Chinese cultural revolution. At one end of the spectrum, the mass character of the newly emerging educated strata made them manipulable by upstart or established leaders (this was the alternative exemplified by Mao Zedong's mobilisation of students). The other extreme, seen as an adequate but not easily achievable response to the advanced modern predicament, is an intellectual transformation that would overcome—or at least tone down—a distinction that Patočka had previously stressed and was to reaffirm later: the difference between the intellectual and the 'spiritual human being' (*duchovní člověk*). At issue is the question of transcendence, more precisely the double transcendence which Patočka sees as a defining anthropological feature. He distinguishes between vertical transcendence towards the world as an ultimate horizon of meaning and horizontal transcendence as an enabling precondition of change in human affairs. The former encompasses 'the "philosophical" and the "moral realm" as the unreal through which transcendence permeates the world' [ibid.: 248; translation J.A.]; the latter can lead to visions of revolutionary alternatives. It should be noted that this conception of transcendence is not committed to religious premises, but sets no a priori limits to a dialogue with religion, and allows for the intertwining of vertical and horizontal transcendence. Patočka expresses sympathy for the Marxists (not least the Czechoslovak ones) who set out to rediscover the anthropological dimension, but criticises them for not grasping the crucial fact of double transcendence. He underlines the point with a brief comment on Hegel and Marx: for him, Marx does not represent an

irreversible progress beyond Hegel, and Hegel is not a source to be reactivated as an alternative or a corrective to Marxism. Rather, the two thinkers—taken together—exemplify an impasse of modern thought: Hegel's subordination of the human world to the logic of spirit was a way of absolutising vertical transcendence, and Marx's unilateral emphasis on human self-creation and self-liberation presupposed a self-contained horizontal transcendence.

Memories and influences

At this point, and in view of guidelines for contributors to this symposium, a few words should be said about the importance of the Prague Spring for the present writer. Being there and observing the progress of the reform movement in the 1960s was of course an invaluable sociological education. But on the more specific disciplinary level, the sociological connection was not the most direct one. During my years in Prague, I studied philosophy and history, and although I followed the rebirth of sociology in the 1960s with interest, it was not my main concern. The primary reference was philosophical. But although I now regard Jan Patočka as the greatest Czech thinker and his work as the most important Czech contribution to the understanding of modernity and its divergent pathways, that was not yet my view when I left Czechoslovakia. I had barely begun to explore Patočka's writings. The crucial influence was Karel Kosík's comprehensive reinterpretation of Marxism. It is still debated whether it owed more to phenomenological or Hegelian affiliations. My view is that the phenomenological ones were more important, and that was certainly how I read *Dialectics of the Concrete* at the time (of course, the phenomenological connection had more than a little to do with Patočka, but that was less clear to me then).

Kosík certainly did not think of himself as a sociologist, and has not been read as such. My research interests and projects moved closer to sociology during the stay in Frankfurt, and the neo-Marxism evident in publications from the early to mid-1970s reflects influences from that quarter, although the link to the Prague background was never lost. But there was a further twist. In the second half of the 1970s, I engaged more intensively with the sociological classics, especially Durkheim and Weber, and this led to a more fundamental critique of Marx and the tradition—or more precisely the complex of traditions—taking off from him. It now seems clear to me (although it was not so obvious at the time) that my broadly phenomenological reading of the texts in question was significantly inspired by Kosík's way of reading Marx. This became for me the most important bridge between philosophy and sociology.

More direct contact with Czech sociology came later. Conversations with Zdeněk Strmiska during my sabbaticals in Paris, and with Jaroslav Krejčí, Pavel Machonin, Jiří Musil, and Miloslav Petrušek in Prague, after my return from Australia to Europe, were particularly instructive. All these scholars had spent the

1960s in Prague and had much to say about that period. There was also a historical legacy to be rediscovered. The first Czechoslovak Republic had developed a vigorous sociological tradition (and its two heads of state were sociologists). In 1967–1968, Czechoslovak sociologists were well on their way to reviving that ancestry. As for the specific agenda of civilisational analysis, understood as a branch of historical sociology with its own philosophical connections, two initiatives coming from Prague should be noted, even if they emerged outside the mainstream of sociological revival. In both cases, but in very different ways, they drew on interrelated critical readings of Arnold Toynbee and Max Weber. Jan Patočka had already taken that path in an unfinished text, probably from the late 1950s, and to the best of my knowledge the first attempt to theorise modernity as a new type of civilisation. It was, among other things, a response to the increasingly visible problems of the alternative modernity represented by communism. In the 1960s, Jaroslav Krejčí began to develop a more comprehensive programme for comparative civilisational analysis, which he continued in exile. He saw that approach as the most promising key to Czechoslovak experiences in the 20th century.

All the above-mentioned authors and ideas were significant sources for the department of historical sociology at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague, with which I have cooperated since its foundation in 2008. The sociological anchorage is important for us, but so are the historical problems posed—in particular—by the 20th-century paroxysm of modernity.

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Prague Spring 1968 at 50

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Fifty years after the Prague Spring of 1968 one can notice an interesting contrast between the commemoration of the hopes of the Spring in the West and the priority given to the commemoration of the August 1968 invasion that crushed the project known as 'socialism with a human face' in the East. This may be revealing not just of different experiences with 1968 in both parts of then divided Europe as much as of the post-1989 politics of memory in the Czech lands.

Looking back fifty years on we note that there is no urgent need of a new history of the 1968 Czechoslovak experiment (the archives have been opened and much has been published) but there may be a case for revisiting the ideas associated with 1968 and their resonance (or lack thereof) in the country itself as well as in a broader European context.

Three aspects deserve to be mentioned in this respect:

1. The Prague Spring revived the debate about Czech democratic exceptionalism in the context of European socialism.
2. It was often interpreted as part of an international generational revolt against the establishments, East and West.
3. Finally, the most far-reaching reform within the Soviet sphere provided, twenty years on, a belated (and thus doomed) inspiration for Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to save the system.

The Prague Spring did not start with the election of Alexander Dubček as Party leader on 5 January 1968 and was not concluded with the Soviet-led invasion of 21 August. Rather it should be understood as a process that started in the early 1960s with converging pressures for economic reforms, identified with the name of Ota Šik, Slovak resentment of Prague centralism (hence Dubček), and the gradual emancipation of the cultural sphere from the strictures of ideological censorship. The latter development accounts for the golden age of Czech cinema, theatre, and literature which made a significant and lasting impact throughout Europe. The culmination of this three-pronged process brought about political change that began with the abolition of censorship and the separation of Party

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and state. In other words, 1968 was not—as was often argued later—just an internal squabble within the Party elite, it was, in Václav Havel's words, 'above all a civic renewal, a restoration of human dignity, the trust in the capacities and possibilities of citizens to change society' [Havel 1999: 12; translation J.R.].

The interpretations of the democratisation process revived several versions of Czech exceptionalism. They obviously followed a reading of inter-war Central Europe as sliding towards authoritarianism with Czechoslovakia as a democratic exception. The first interpretation could be summed up as the triumph of Czech and Slovak culture over the communist structure. The emancipation of the cultural sphere from the diktat of censorship without being subjected to that of the market produced a powerful 1960s cultural background to the political and societal changes associated with 1968. A related version of the argument concerns the enduring democratic character of Czech political culture. Authors, like Gordon Skilling in his monumental study of the Prague Spring, have argued that the legacies of the pre-war democracy, followed between 1945 and 1948 by a 'democratic interlude', have left in the society (even in large parts of the KSČ membership) values and beliefs that were in conflict with the Stalinist regime. This political culture eventually resurfaced in the 1960s and helped to bring about fundamental change which represented a break with Soviet-type communism [Skilling 1976; Brown and Wightman 1977].

The third and possibly most interesting debate about the meaning of 1968, which set two leading Czech intellectuals, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, in opposition to each other is worth re-reading half a century later [Kundera 1968; Havel 1969].¹ Not for the post-invasion assessment. Kundera's overstatement that 'the significance of the Czechoslovak Fall goes beyond that of the Spring itself' and the hope that the reformist project could survive the invasion were mercilessly dismissed by Havel as sheer delusion. But it is the meaning of the project of the Prague Spring that may be worth revisiting. Following on Hubert Gordon Schauer's provocative 19th-century question about what ultimately justifies the efforts put into producing a culture in the Czech language, Kundera makes a plea for the contribution of small nations to universal values and ideas:

A small nation on the other hand, if it has achieved any significance in the world, must constantly generate it anew, day in and day out. The moment it ceases to produce things of value, it loses the justification for its existence, and in the end it may finally actually cease to exist because it is fragile and destructible. The production of things of value is bound to the question of its very being ... [Kundera 1968: 5; translation Tim West²]

¹ The three articles (with Kundera's reply to Havel) were reprinted in *Literární noviny* on 27 December 2007.

² The complete text of this translation of Kundera [1968] is accessible at: https://www.academia.edu/2503513/Czech_Destiny_Milan_Kundera_

For Kundera the Prague Spring was of significance for Europe as a whole because, beyond Eastern Stalinism and Western capitalism, it tried to combine socialism with democracy. Not a mere remake of the 'third way' nor a blueprint for a radiant future, the Czechoslovak heresy was crushed, but the far-reaching significance of the project for the future of the European Left remains. Havel's take, in contrast, was more sober and realistic: restoring basic freedoms was no doubt wonderful, the last time we had them was thirty years ago, and indeed this is considered 'normal' in most civilised European countries:

... if we're going to imagine that a country has placed itself at the center of world history because it wishes to establish freedom of expression—something taken for granted in most of the civilized world—and to check the tyranny of its secret police, in all seriousness we shall become nothing more than self-complacent hacks, laughable in our provincial messianism! Freedom and the rule of law are the most basic preconditions for a normally and soundly functioning societal organism, and should any state attempt to reestablish them after years of their absence it's doing nothing historically momentous but simply trying to remove its own abnormality ... [Havel 1969; translation Tim West³]

For some thirty years it seemed that the outcome of the choice between Kundera's somewhat messianic vision vs Havel's lucid realism was fairly obvious to most Czechs. Yet today, half a century later, as communism is long dead and Western 'normalcy' is in crisis, Kundera's plea for the 'Czechoslovak possibility' (československá možnost) [Kundera 1969] acquires perhaps a new resonance.

Another way to highlight the European dimension of the Prague Spring is to interpret it through the prism of the youth rebellions which in 1968 shook the political establishments throughout the continent. There was May 1968 in France, the Polish events of March 1968, Berlin, Belgrade... The common denominator of these movements was the search for alternative models of society with contrasting, confusing, and often contradictory references to socialism: from self-management in the workplace to the Christian-Marxist dialogue or to discussions about the impact of sciences and technology on the evolution of modern societies East and West. And there were not insignificant Czech contributions to all of the above. Karel Kosík's Marxist humanism (influenced by Patočka's phenomenology) and his civilisational pessimism related precisely to the dehumanising role of science and technology; or, on the contrary, Radovan Richta's civilisational optimism based on the 'scientific and technological revolution'.⁴ The former proved

³ The complete text of this translation of Havel [1969] is accessible at: https://www.academia.edu/2503514/Czech_Destiny_V%C3%A1clav_Havel_.

⁴ Around the year 1968 Western Europe saw the publication of Karel Kosík's *Dialectic of the Concrete* (Dialektika konkrétního) and Radovan Richta's *Civilization at the Crossroads* (Civilizace na rozcestí).

incompatible with the 'normalisation' *Gleichschaltung* of the 1970s, the latter's technocratic faith in the progress of sciences rather easily blended in. Both were considered the most influential Czech thinkers of the late 1960s in Europe and both were thus part of what Jan Patočka had in mind in attempting to frame the Prague Spring reforms in a European context and calling for a dialogue between intellectuals East and West. Patočka himself was much more open to those debates than is usually admitted among experts in Prague. His contribution was a piece entitled 'Intelgence a opozice', a lecture given during the spring in Germany, where he states that 'the position of intellectuals in the East is better ... because they do not consider basic democratic rights as a mere means to an end but as the end in itself'. [Patočka 2006: 244, fn. 271; translation J.R.]

And that indeed proved to be the main contrast between 1968 in Prague (or Warsaw) and Paris (or Berlin). To be sure, there is a whole aspect of 1968 which can be interpreted mainly in terms of generations. There is now even a term for that, 'Youthquake', declared in 2017 Word of the Year by the experts at Oxford Dictionaries. It is defined as 'significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people'. The interesting thing about the Prague Spring was that it had indeed involved youth, particularly the student movement which formed its radical wing, but that its driving force was the previous generation, that which experienced (supported or was at the receiving end of) 1945/ 1948 and its aftermath. Antonín J. Liehm elaborated on this concept of political generations precisely in 1968 in the introduction to a splendid volume of his interviews with some of the leading intellectual protagonists of 1968 (from Ludvík Vaculík to Josef Škvorecký, from Eduard Goldstücker to Václav Havel, to mention only a few), among the best guides to the politics of culture of the Prague Spring [Liehm 1990].⁵ Many—by no means all—among those who were twenty after the war and had backed the communist takeover in 1948, frustrated and disappointed with the results of a revolution from above, helped in the 1960s to bring about a revolution from below which culminated in 1968.⁶

The generational aspect as much as the political context account for the contrasts and misunderstandings of 1968 between East and West, Prague and Paris. The driving force of the Prague Spring was the aspiration for freedom, whereas in Paris the moment of emancipation combined with the myth of revolution. Milan Kundera described the contrast as follows:

⁵ This book, *Generace*, banned before distribution in 1969, did not appear in Czech until 1990. It was translated into several languages with an afterword by Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Socialism That Came in from the Cold' (English edition: Liehm, A.J. 1971. *The Politics of Culture*. New York: Grove Press).

⁶ Their radicalism in undoing what they had helped to bring about two decades earlier perplexed the non-communists and particularly those belonging to an in-between generational group: cf. *An Almanac of the Year 1956* (republished as Hiršal and Kolář [2005]) with contributions of Josef Škvorecký, Bohumil Hrabal, Emil Juliš, Jiří Kolář, Josef Hiršal, Jan Zábřana, Jiří Kuběna, and Václav Havel.

Paris's May was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was the explosion of post-revolutionary scepticism ... Paris's May was a radical uprising, whereas what had, for many a long year, been leading towards the explosion of the Prague Spring was a popular revolt by moderates. [Kundera 1978: x; translation J.R.]

While Western radicals looked to the Third World, European identity was part of 1968 in Prague. Again in Kundera's words:

Paris's May challenged the basis of what is called European culture and its traditional values. The Prague Spring was a passionate defence of the European cultural tradition in the widest and most tolerant sense of the term (a defence of Christianity just as much as of modern art—both rejected by those in power). We all struggled for the right to maintain that tradition that had been threatened by the anti-western messianism of Russian totalitarianism. [Kundera 1978: x-xi; translation J.R.]

However, the contrast highlighted here should not make us forget the intellectually and politically important convergence between the Eastern and Western 68ers. The latter during the following decade abandoned Marxism and became anti-totalitarian liberals of different shades, and thus more in tune with the 1970s Czech dissidents around common issues concerning human rights, civil society, and the overcoming of the partition of Europe.

Finally, there is another dimension of the spring of 1968 as the 'supreme stage' of reformism in the Soviet bloc and its implications for the divided Europe. Zdeněk Mlynář, one of the architects of the political reforms in 1968 and the youngest member of the politburo, recalled the way Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership had described to Dubček and his colleagues the reasons for the invasion: 'Precisely because the territorial results of the last war are untouchable to us we had to intervene in Czechoslovakia.' The West will not move, so, 'what do you think will be done on your behalf? Comrades Tito, Ceaușescu, Berlinguer will make speeches. Well, and what of it? You are counting on the Communist movement in Western Europe? But that has remained insignificant for the last 50 years.' [Mlynář 1978: 306–307]

That part is familiar enough. Indeed Tito and the Eurocommunists in the West protested and claimed for their benefit to continue the legacy of the Prague Spring as a way to enhance their democratic credentials.

However, the real legacy came back with a vengeance twenty years on. Gorbachev, Mlynář's friend and roommate from the student days, became leader of the Soviet Communist Party and sought inspiration for his perestroika in the Prague Spring of 1968. Asked what was the difference between his reforms and those of Dubček, the spokesman for Gorbachev replied simply: '19 years'. That certainly was not good enough to rehabilitate 'socialism with a human face' in the eyes of sceptical Czechs and Slovaks twenty years on. It is not easy to identify with a defeated project with a price tag in the form of another twenty years in a

post-totalitarian dictatorship. But it did matter for what was unfolding in Moscow and its relationship to its dependencies. Jiří Dienstbier, a prominent Czech journalist from 1968, a dissident turned prisoner turned stoker, became minister of foreign affairs in December of 1989. On his first meeting with Gorbachev he referred to the 1968 hopes crushed by Moscow, to which Gorbachev replied: 'we thought we had been strangling the Prague Spring, but we were actually strangling ourselves' [Dienstbier quoted in Castellano and Jůn 2008: 18].

The Prague Spring was seen as the chance to reform the system. The crushing of it thus prevented reform at the very centre and accounts for its intractable crisis. In other words, the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia prepared the ground for the unravelling of the Soviet system. The contribution of the Prague Spring, even though crushed violently, should not be underestimated.

1989 as a continuation of or break with 1968?

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was obviously understood as the undoing of the legacy of the 'real socialism' of the Husák era, but it was not framed as a continuation of the 'interrupted revolution' of 1968. To be sure, some side-lined 68ers and a number of Western observers were inclined to point to that continuity with the aspirations of the Prague Spring. But the main protagonists of 1989 in Prague were eager to distance themselves from the 'illusions of 1968'. The aim was no longer the democratisation of socialism but simply democracy. Instead of searching for a 'third way' between capitalism and Soviet-style socialism the goal was the introduction of markets without adjectives: 'the third way leads to the Third World' said Václav Klaus, the promoter of radical free market economic reforms. And the 'return to Europe', translated in foreign policy terms, was no longer about extending the margins of manoeuvre in Central Europe between East and West, but about joining Western ('Euro-Atlantic') institutions as quickly as possible. Václav Havel rather than Alexander Dubček became the president and the embodiment of these goals [Rupnik 2018].

The reasons are understandable: it was not easy in 1989 to identify with a project that crashed tragically and was followed by twenty years of relentless 'normalisation'. All one can add is that 1968 was the last Czech attempt to propose not a blueprint but a vision (deemed utopian or inconsistent afterwards) that transcended the country and concerned Europe as a whole. In contrast, 1989 was the first revolution not to propose a new social project. A revolution without violence and utopias, but also without a strong new idea. It was, indeed, as historian François Furet called it, a 'revolution-restoration', or, to borrow a description from Jürgen Habermas, a 'nachholende Revolution'. The aim was to restore national and popular sovereignty, the rule of law, private property and imitate the Western model. For that reason the Velvet Revolution of 1989 has been considered in Prague since the 1990s an 'anti-1968' and today the commemorations focus on

the tragedy of the invasion of August 1968 rather than the hopes and aspirations of the Spring.

The distancing from the ideas and illusions of 1968 may be understandable. There are, however, two snags to this. First, if your aim is to imitate Western economic and political models you cease to be interesting for the West. And, more importantly: what if you are imitating a model in crisis? In thinking that one through, you may be forgiven for stumbling upon alternative ideas, projects, utopias associated with the Prague Spring of 1968.

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The Paradox of 1968

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The events of 1968 on the European continent, divided by the Iron Curtain, were an expression of an error on both sides and as such were a paradox. Waves of discontent with the existing system arose in the East and the West, but what the disaffected on one side were striving to bring about was exactly what the disaffected on the other side were trying to get rid of. Many young people, students, and intellectuals in the West had illusions about the humanitarian potential of the regimes in the 'socialist camp' or at least of the ideas that that camp asserted. They saw those regimes as an alternative to the system of a market economy and liberal democracy, a system in which some elites, at least in Germany and France, were rightly suspected of having collaborated with National Socialism, the birth of which was in the view of the protesters the result of contradictions inherent to the capitalist system. On the other side of the curtain, by contrast, the Czechoslovak reform process, like previous attempts at reform in Poland and Hungary, arose out of the reality of oppression and shortage that characterised the implementation of the socialist ideal in practice. The Czechoslovak reform plan espoused the same democratic values that the 68ers in the West regarded as hopelessly corrupted. One side was thus embracing ideas that the other side was trying to distance itself from, and vice versa.

An observer who happened to witness both reform processes, in Prague and in Frankfurt, would have had an excellent chance to make comparisons, providing a good basis for practical training in the sociological gaze. Theoretical axioms about the diversity of social constructions, each generation's influence on how a society describes itself, and the way reality is created by people themselves, but not under conditions that they choose freely, were being exemplarily filled in with empirical facts before the observer's very eyes. It was possible to witness how fundamentally similar social mechanisms can create entirely different life worlds if they are steered by different outcomes from the discourses of power.

It was thus possible to get a glimpse of the deeper differences between the 'Western' and 'Eastern' versions of these reform movements. The first pronounced difference was a generational one: while in Western Europe it was the younger generations revolting against the generations in power at the time that

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were reproducing a suspect system, the reform movement of the Prague Spring was driven by the generations who after 1945 had had an active hand in building up the socialist regime, and who twenty years later began to realise the fundamental mistakes they had made and consequently also the wrong they had perpetrated against the next generations. The reformers were part of the elites who sustained the regime, and unlike in Western societies the reform movement had the support of most of the population, not just students and intellectuals. I recall conversations with Eduard Goldstücker and his lecture at the University of Konstanz in 1984. He explained why young intellectuals between the wars became deeply involved in the Left movement, but this was also a reflection on how they led their own society astray, and an apology to the younger generations for the restrictions, oppression and isolation they had thus caused them: 'I feel guilty, not so much for having believed in a utopian ideal, as for trying to persuade others that it was true.' [Goldstücker 2001: 27] That this was not merely a retrospective reflection but a deep feeling that existed among the reformers even before 1968 is demonstrated by a quote from the introduction to *Antologie existencialismu* (An Anthology of Existentialism) published at the Higher Party School of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1967: 'Dogmatism essentially made the one brand of philosophy into an affair of the state ... It is no surprise then that this had to be followed by disillusionment. Many felt very strongly [that]: everything is different—or to be fairer—much is different from what we believed and said (and it is not always acknowledged: from what we ourselves were teaching ...)' [Šindelář 1967: 7]. It could be said that while daughters and sons in the West were turning to their parents with the question, what had they done in the past, and tried then to change the future state of things, in the East the generations of parents were trying to correct the mistakes they had made themselves.

Here another significant difference in the construction of social reality is revealed that stems from the distinct historical life backgrounds and the different collective memory of those involved on each side. One of the essential goals of the reform movements on either side of the Iron Curtain was to open up a new perspective on the past as a means to paving the way for a better future. In the Marxist tradition the Western European students' movement called attention to the past of the existing democratic systems as sullied by fascism. In extreme cases it saw the destruction of capitalism, as the social order that gave birth to fascism, to be a guarantee that the past would never repeat itself. The reformers of the Prague Spring, by contrast, had already witnessed the destruction of capitalism and knew very well that achieving that ideal did not lead to the birth of an ideal society, as it involved a wave of oppression and violence that destroyed many of the humanitarian achievements that had been ushered in by the previous, 'bourgeois' revolution. Viewed in this light, the Prague Spring thus also introduced a new perspective on the nation's past, the difference being that this perspective allowed for and acknowledged the positive attributes of civil society and liberal democracy.

This attempt and the suppression of it by Warsaw Pact troops impacted the development of society on several levels. It of course directly affected the life stories of the thousands involved. But there were also historical ramifications: on the more general level of societal evolution the suppression of the 'Prague Spring' represented a thwarted opportunity to create an alternative to the actually existing Soviet-style socialist regimes—a failing that contributed to the collapse of the 'socialist camp' twenty years later. As Jürgen Habermas (1973) shows in his analysis of the problems of the late capitalist state, Western European societies have at their disposal two basic models and legitimising narratives, and they regularly swing back and forth between them in order to resolve, with relative success so far, their internal conflicts. The social problems that are caused by market dysfunctionality under liberal or neoliberal regimes can be corrected by the regime and semantics of the welfare state within the frame of the same system, without the need to make any radical change to the system's basic parameters. The redistributive welfare state, in rectifying and thereby protecting the market economy, serves as a legitimate variant of the same system. The chance to create a variant of the system to rectify the dysfunctions of the planned economy and the dominance of one party that the Prague Spring could have been was however rendered impossible by the system itself. Looked at this way, the end of the Prague experiment did not test the limits of the social-democratic possibilities for the evolution of Western societies. The welfare state, functioning in the conditions of a pluralist democracy, remains an essential system variant for maintaining social peace in European-type market economies. What the Prague Spring probably foundered on was the attempt to create a civil and thus pluralist society that would operate on the basis of limited private property. It was the limits of actually existing socialism that were thereby tested, not the limits of Western-type social democracy. Observed from a purely positivist perspective, the Prague experiment could have shown whether it is possible to base a democratic pluralist system on some form of collective ownership, i.e. to set it up in some other way than its traditional form. To put it in sociological terms, the end of the Prague experiment was a demonstration of the evolutionary limitations of a system incapable of providing the system variants that were necessary for its survival. For many this was a sign of the irreformability of actually existing socialism, which was ultimately proven to be true by the developments of 1989.

The year 1968 also of course had a dramatic impact on the development of Czechoslovak society. The relaxation of censorship and the relative freedom of the press and freedom of assembly gave many, and especially the young generation, a taste of civic freedom. Sociological surveys from that time [Tížik and Kmeř 2016: 30ff] show a strong identification among the population with the values of liberal democracy and civil society, even among members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). From a sociological perspective what is remarkable is that support for reform seems to have been motivated by opposition to political oppression and the desire for freedom, and not by economic deprivation. This fact was later often overlooked when Western analysts made assumptions about the

motives behind the transformation after 1989. The longing for consumer goods and economic advantages in their view played the primary role, a view moreover consistent with the expectations of the West German population, welcoming their new compatriots from the East at border crossings with wreathes of bananas, the shortage of which in East Germany had come to symbolise the shortcomings of actually existing socialism.

The suppression of the reform movement and the ensuing 'normalisation' process had however a lasting effect up to the present day. There were consequences for the social structure of society. Thousands of life stories that remained anonymous were affected. My friends in Prague who lived through the Prague Spring and the two decades of normalisation that followed recall that the worst part for them was the loss of all hope that was felt after August 1968. This, apparently, is how the 'grey zone' (Šiklová 1990), to which most of the population belonged, felt about life, confronted again with the conditions that the Prague Spring had been trying to eliminate. Radical changes occurred on the level of the 'functional elites' (Šrubař 1998). There was a mass turnover of members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and hence vast replacements of political, economic, administrative, cultural, and scientific staff. And not just the leading exponents of reform were affected. Approximately 40% of the functional elites in the forenamed sectors lost their jobs. More than 400 000 CPC members were expelled or saw their Party membership cancelled. To replace them and fill nomenclature positions the Party recruited more than 300 000 'candidates' in the 1970s. Given that approximately one-half of these new members were under the age of 25, the functional elites were markedly rejuvenated by a generation that pragmatically took advantage of the Party's normalisation measures to rise up the social ladder. Many members of these functional elites, especially in the economic sector, who had priority access to useful information and connections, became successfully involved in the privatisation process after 1989 and under new conditions further profited from their elite head start. Opposite this group were a considerable number of people who either were engaged in the dissident movement or sooner or later emigrated. One could say that the year 1968 dealt out a new hand of cards in terms of people's life stories and upward or downward social mobility, the consequences of which remain apparent in the structures of Czech society up to the present day.

How 1968 affected individual life stories can be demonstrated through my own example. This example is not typical, but it can serve as an illustration. Like for many others, the onset of 'normalisation' after August 1968 was also my reason for going into exile. This was not an easy decision. For the thirty-somethings of today, used to traveling to every possible and impossible corner of the world with their EU passport and returning home unobstructed, it is hard to imagine that crossing an imaginary line in the landscape could entail the irretrievable loss of one's home, family, and friends. The departure into the unknown, with no option of returning, led, on the other hand, to remarkable and often paradoxical experiences that were not without their own impact. When I arrived at the

university in Frankfurt, I discovered to my surprise that the study of Marxism and its philosophical and economic sources that I was required to go through in Prague had prepared me perfectly to teach in the revolutionary environment of a German university. Although my interests were phenomenology, the sociology of knowledge, and East European history, the students were interested in Marxism in its various versions. Reactions to my Marxist qualifications were, however, varied: while some colleagues were happy to entrust me with the respective portions of their classes because they would be in the hands of someone with direct experience of Marxist practices, others suspected that based on this very same fact the 'pure teaching' of Marxism would be compromised. I remember seminars in which harsh debates erupted over whether it is at all possible to talk in socialist circumstances about 'alienation' the way Karel Kosík dared to in his *Dialektika konkrétního* (Dialectics of the Concrete) [Kosík 1976 (1963)]. What was unpleasant was when radical students stood watch at the entrances to libraries to monitor what books readers were checking out. I developed from this the 'pedagogical' habit of always presenting students with every perspective on a given topic in the most genuine way possible and leaving them to form their own opinion on the matter. A university should be a well-laid table, where everyone can choose according to their preferences and taste.

Exile and normalisation were not, however, the only ways in which 1968 impacted lives and careers. The gradual thaw in the regime had been felt several years earlier. The more relaxed environment before 1968 had had a positive effect on the development of the social sciences and sociology, evidence of which was the restoration of institutions in these fields in the second half of the 1960s and a number of studies in which Czechoslovak society was charted from a sociological perspective for the first time since 1948. In 1965 it again became possible to study sociology at Charles University's Faculty of Arts, albeit in very provisional conditions. There was no access to current international literature so students had to depend on what they learned from their lecturers. The Institute of Sociology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences began functioning and there students were able to take part in the work on empirical projects and get their first insight into the social and value structures of their own society. It became possible to study sociology abroad, albeit only in the allied 'foreign land' of Poland. Group excursions to Western universities were organised for students and the first contacts were formed with their student movement. Rudi Dutschke appeared in Prague, not to mention Allen Ginsberg, eating dumplings with his hands. Jan Patočka began lecturing at the Faculty of Arts again and his teaching opened up horizons that extended well beyond the scope of instruction provided up to that time. Under the influence of this 'early spring' a revival process set in even in places where one would not have expected. In 1967 the Department of Marxist Philosophy at the Higher Party School published—though only for internal purposes—an anthology containing the first translations of Martin Heidegger's writings. Also, the doors of the Party vault opened slightly and some 'libri prohibiti' were allowed

to see the light of day, such as Karl Marx's first version of *Das Kapital* known as 'Grundrisse'. Available on photographs not even the size of postcard format, we pored over them with a magnifying glass and discovered that even much of Marx was different from what the official version told us. This led to the realisation that a prophet can turn into a heretic. For the young generation the world began to open up in all its pluralistic diversity, which official teachings, which divided societies by class into two solid camps of truth and lies, tried to conceal, but which obviously it was not able to suppress.

My interest in phenomenology and its development had been awoken in Prague in those days by Patočka's work. Intersubjectivity and the construction of social reality were themes that touched fundamentally on the basic sociological question of 'how is society possible'. My departure for Germany was also motivated by the awareness that the 'normalisation' that was beginning to take shape would not be the kind of environment in which this interest could be pursued. My Frankfurt dissertation drew me further in the direction of 'phenomenological sociology' and ultimately into the group around Thomas Luckmann, where this subject was pursued and supported. I somehow automatically became a part of something that considered itself a phenomenological movement, whose older generation was concerned with the fate of Jan Patočka, to whom many of that generation were tied by close friendship. Walter Biemel approached me at that time and asked whether I couldn't begin translating selected writings by Patočka into German, a task my wife and I took on. In cooperation with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna I became the co-editor of a series of Patočka's writings, which brought me into contact with dissidents at home and in exile. I found myself in the position of someone with one foot in sociology and the other in phenomenological philosophy, which was then cemented by my decision to become the publisher of the sociological and phenomenological writings of Alfred Schütz. And it seems that this awkward position in the times of specialisation in the social sciences will remain mine for life. Viewed in this light, the year 1968 was thus truly a fateful year.

If I were to sum up the preceding comments in a concluding statement, it would be roughly the following: The Prague Spring of 1968 and its subsequent suppression impacted many people's life stories, thereby altering the social structure of Czechoslovak society, with consequences that can still be felt today. As a thwarted attempt at trying out a systemic alternative, the suppression of reforms in Prague became one of the factors that led to the collapse of the systems of actually existing socialism twenty years later. This is the main difference from the results of the 1968 movement in Western Europe. The reforms that were called for in the West supported the welfare state. The functional necessity of the redistributive welfare state for preserving social peace within a market economy wedded to a pluralist democracy did not remain the programme of social democracy alone. It became generally accepted as a political necessity. This paradoxically had the simultaneous effect of weakening social democratic parties, as they lost

what distinguished them from other parties and consequently also a portion of their electorate. While the quashing of the Prague Spring ultimately helped to destabilise the socialist regimes, the reform impetus that came from the student movement in Western Europe was largely absorbed within society and helped to strengthen the existing system. Thus, the paradox of the unintended consequences of intentional acts.

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Shock in Florence

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The summer of 1968 was a turning point in my political and intellectual development. This statement will not sound particularly sensational, given the fact that a very great number of people that are my age and older will probably say the same. But each individual case is specific, and for me the crucial event happened in Florence on August 21 and the following days.

The marvellous Italian town of Florence was full of tourists that summer, as it always is. But for the first time since the communist take-over in Eastern Central and Eastern Europe, many of the tourists in Italy were Czechs and Slovaks. They took advantage of loosened travel restrictions in their home country and enjoyed the wonders of Italy. I was there as a student attending summer courses at the University of Florence, spanning the time between finishing school and starting my studies at the university.

Having grown up in Munich which is only about 200 miles from the Italian border, I had learned, in addition to the languages taught at the gymnasium, the Italian language. On several hitchhiking trips in Italy I had gotten the impression that a leftist Catholic like me could learn a lot there, both from Catholics and from communists. In the exams of the Italian Cultural Institute in Munich, I was awarded a scholarship for the summer courses of 1968 on topics ranging from the art of the Renaissance to Italian history in the 19th and 20th centuries.

When the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact took place, the Italian political parties, including and particularly the communists, vehemently protested against the violent Soviet repression of the experimental 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia. Since most of the tourists from that country understood German, but not Italian, I was among those who translated the texts of flyers and special editions of newspapers to groups of people surrounding me on Cathedral Square in Florence. I will never forget the disappointment and disillusionment, if not horror, in the eyes of those people. This is my most important politically relevant memory of 1968.

Shocking as it was for them and for me, this experience immunised me against all sympathy with Soviet-style communism, but even more so against the

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neo-Stalinist version that surprisingly became popular in radical student circles in the West—through the reception of Mao Zedong’s writings and the so-called cultural revolution in China. I had turned to the Left quite independently at an early age (between 15 and 19) and at the beginning certainly was not free of delusions about the Soviet Union. But now it had become indubitably clear to me that a leftist position had to be a democratic one.

During my student days I ardently studied literary works connected to the Prague Spring from Milan Kundera to Ivan Klíma and Alexandr Kliment, but also philosophical writings (Karel Kosík) and political analyses from other socialist reformers (Jacek Kuroń/Karol Modzelewski in Poland, for example). Perhaps even more important were personal encounters—for example, with the émigré and top Czech economist Jiří Kosta in 1973, and above all with the Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller and her friends in 1972. Heller was a visiting professor at the Free University of Berlin in 1972, teaching a class on Marx’s *Grundrisse*—a class that I found incredibly different from the sterile Marx seminars I had sat through before. Her broad horizon and experiential background in the circles around György Lukács, her passionate and inspiring speaking style—all this led to one of the most intense intellectual experiences of my student life.

When the class ended she mentioned that if I ever came to Budapest she would welcome me there. I did not need to be told this twice. A few weeks later I went—for the first, but certainly not the last time. Ágnes Heller then introduced me to other members of the Lukács group. The most impressive for me was the philosopher György Márkus whom I consider a great and underappreciated figure in modern intellectual history (see the introduction by Axel Honneth and myself to Márkus [2014]). Ágnes Heller even entrusted me with the task of editing and introducing the German edition of what is probably her most systematic contribution to the field of philosophy and social theory, namely her study *Everyday Life* [Heller 1978]. I also translated essays by Ágnes Heller on the family and the future of gender relations (in the volume Hegedüs and Márkus et al. [1974]). In the following years I visited Hungary numerous times, and in other capacities—for example, on a secret mission to make possible the translation of Miklós Haraszti’s journalistic report about the working conditions in a Budapest factory [Haraszti 1975].

These contacts and connections convinced me that the differences between East and West concerning the post-1968 movements were much greater than the similarities. For people deeply influenced by what had happened or was happening in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland at the time, much of the sudden re-emergence of Marxism in the West remained mysterious and problematical. My personal way out of these dilemmas was through an ever stronger interest in American intellectual and political traditions, particularly those that I found inspiring in their radically democratic understanding of politics (John Dewey) and interpersonal relations (George Herbert Mead), but also in their profound re-evaluation of the conditions of religious faith in modern times (William James). I had the feeling of having found in American pragmatism a kind of Archime-

dean point for a rethinking of German (and European) intellectual traditions. This has become constitutive for my intellectual work in many respects,¹ but also for my political activities and publications.²

Tony Judt's famous summary of the experience of August 1968 is certainly well-taken: 'The illusion that Communism was reformable, that Stalinism had been a wrong turning, a mistake that could still be corrected, that the core ideals of democratic pluralism might somehow still be compatible with the structures of Marxist collectivism: that illusion was crushed under the tanks on August 21 1968 and it never recovered. Alexander Dubček and his Action Program were not a beginning but an end.' [Judt 2005: 447] But history is never over. Maybe some of the lessons drawn post 1968 and guiding the developments after 1989 will also retrospectively be seen as illusions. If the financial crisis of 2008 had gotten completely out of control or if a new financial crisis is ahead, if a new major war erupts because of the foreign policy of the world's strongest military power, we will be forced to question contemporary capitalism again and probably rethink the heritage of the Prague Spring of 1968 in the sense of a viable combination of democracy and socialism.

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¹ Particularly the series of books leading from *George Herbert Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought* [Joas 1985] through *Pragmatism and Social Theory* [1993] and *The Creativity of Action* [1996a] to *The Genesis of Values* [2000].

² One of my writings on the 'communitarians' led to my only publication in Czech so far: Joas [1996b].

1968 in West Central Europe

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I was in West Germany and Switzerland during the 'May events' and the Prague Spring, and in August I was on what would now be called an internship in Basel. As I arrived in the office, Dr Goldstein announced in an unusually solemn tone: 'Die Russen sind einmarschiert'. I remember pointlessly telephoning the British embassy as though it might have anything to say which was not already in the local papers; perhaps it was a touch of homesickness after eight months abroad, and there was a certain amount of discussion about whether there might be a serious response from the West. One of my colleagues was an emigrant from Czechoslovakia, another from Hungary, but I do not recall details of a conversation about the invasion, unlike the earlier occasion when the Czech, whom I had not previously heard speaking English, burst in to say 'Bobby Kennedy's been shot'.

I must have followed the subsequent events in Czechoslovakia in the papers, but I do not recall anything else from that time. My job ended at the end of the month and I travelled for another few weeks before taking up my university place at Oxford. There, the aftermath of May 1968 continued [Bhambra and Demir 2009], with demonstrations against the US war in Vietnam and more local concerns such as a visit to Oxford by the racist Conservative politician Enoch Powell. I considered myself a Marxist, but without any attachment except participation in the broadly-based, if slightly pretentiously named, 'Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students'. I observed with detachment the internal Trotskyist debates over whether the USSR should be seen as a 'degenerate workers' state' or as a form of 'state capitalism'. In retrospect I was, like many people in the West, too inclined to attempt a would-be balanced assessment of the respective deficiencies of capitalism and state socialism and their respective hegemons.¹

My only connection with Czechoslovakia was a short holiday trip in 1970 with two school-friends, driving from Budapest through Slovakia to Poland and back through Prague, where the pubs seemed curiously homely compared to the rather starker urban scene in Warsaw. We had seen Western newspapers here and there in Poland and there were none in Czechoslovakia, but we were anyway heading back to Munich and the UK.

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¹ My colleague Julius Carlebach asked me in late 1989 what 'people like me' were going to do now. 'Business as usual', I replied.

Having begun a PhD at Sussex University with Tom Bottomore, I also began to teach Sociology and European Studies in 1973. Along my corridor were the Romanian exile Zevedei Barbu [Maci and Finkenthal 2015], Sergei Hackel, who combined teaching Russian with a role as a Russian Arch-priest, and Zdenek Kavan, teaching International Relations and still attached to the School of Global Studies at Sussex. Somewhere nearby was Eduard Goldstücker, whom I sometimes heard speaking Czech with Zdenek. I barely knew Goldstücker, but I was friendly with Zdenek and together we accompanied a group of Sussex students on a tour of EU institutions, Zdenek without a passport but carrying instead a stateless person's document. (He told me that later his brother countersigned his application for his new Czechoslovak passport.) In a seminar or conference paper Zdenek mapped out the cycle in the bloc between dissidence, reform, and repression—a cycle without any visible end. I remember asking someone from Czechoslovakia if Radovan Richta, whose book *Civilizace na rozcestí* [Richta et al. 1969] had impressed me, had survived the normalisation process, and was sadly told that he had accommodated to the new regime.

I must confess that I did not participate in the dissident scene or the peace movement, while supporting END (European Nuclear Disarmament) and other such initiatives. Other Sussex colleagues, notably Mary Kaldor and Barbara Einhorn, were of course active in these. By coincidence, though I did not know this at the time, Barbara and I were both in the GDR in April 1983. I had a very enjoyable visit to Leipzig on a British Council exchange, while Barbara, visiting peace movement activists, was imprisoned and deported. This banal reminiscence illustrates for me the knife-edge of life in an authoritarian state such as Czechoslovakia endured until 1989. I returned to Leipzig on the same programme in April 1988, by which time there was a strong sense that things were on the slide, with emigration more openly spoken about. I repaid the hospitality of my then guide, an enthusiastic supporter of the regime, by telling her that I thought the right to emigrate was a fundamental human right. On I went in a taxi to a party at the house of a social psychologist I had met by chance five years earlier. The driver brushed aside polite comments about how I was enjoying my stay and launched into a critique of the state of things. 'What about Perestroika?', I asked. 'Wir wollen keine Perestroika', he replied. 'Dann würden wir Russen sein.'

In the 1980s I had begun to work on political language in a comparative East-West context [Outhwaite 1986, 1989] and planned a book on the two German states with another Sussex colleague, the sociolinguist Ulrike Meinhof (only distantly related to the even more famous one). We quietly abandoned the book, but I began to work more substantially on state socialism and its aftermath in the 1990s, including a book with Larry Ray [Outhwaite 1996; Outhwaite and Ray 2005].²

² At Sussex in late 1989 we were visited by a Chinese delegation, whose leader (and the only one who spoke English) seemed telepathic. Just as I was wondering if I dared ask

My retrospect on the Prague Spring is probably that of many Western observers. Like the reform efforts in 1956 and Perestroika in the late 1980s, it showed, I think, the obstacles to, but not the impossibility of, 'socialism with a human face'. The Czechoslovak lesson was fairly clear that any change would have to come either in, or with the acquiescence of, the USSR. As my Swiss colleague said, it was 'the Russians' who invaded, even if the operation was technically a Warsaw Pact one, with the Germans kept in the background in order to avoid embarrassing parallels with 1938–1939.

Apart from the dissident scene, the action then moved to Poland, where the 1968 opposition movement had attracted less attention; following the anti-Semitic pogrom there, I came to know Zygmunt Bauman when he ended up in Leeds in 1972. Solidarność seemed to have better prospects, in a somewhat less repressive environment where opposition was more overt. Again, military rule in 1981, self-imposed to avoid a probable repetition of Czechoslovakia in 1968, showed the limits to endogenous reform.

The idea of market socialism continued to be an attractive one on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In the West at least, discussion tended to be somewhat divided between abstract philosophical programmes on the one hand and analyses which addressed the realities of introducing such reforms in communist Europe and their partial success in Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. Among the best was that by Alec Nove [1983]. Around that time Bottomore introduced me to Zagorka Golubović, who pointed out firmly that we should not believe that Yugoslavia was so different from the other socialist states just because of the rhetoric of self-management and the fact that we could buy our usual newspapers there and pay with credit cards.

We shall never know, barring possible surprises from Cuba, whether democratisation and state-socialist economic organisation were compatible; North Korea will presumably reunify some time as unilaterally as Germany. Russia, after a brief semi-democratic interlude, has settled, like China, into a form of authoritarian state capitalism.

After 1989, my interest in the region, despite my inability to work in any post-communist language except German, was substantially driven by the challenge of the nearest thing to a macro-sociological experiment: the responses of a dozen very different societies, which had experienced a similar Ordnungspolitik, to what now seemed like an open future. The following decades continued to throw up surprises, of which the current authoritarian turn in Hungary and Poland is the most recent example. The separatist fragmentation of the region (including Russia), despite the tragic fate of Yugoslavia and the Czecho-Slovak velvet divorce, has not been as dramatic as was widely expected.

about the implications for China of what had just happened in Europe, she fixed me with a firm stare and assured us that there were none. In some ways she was right [see Tucker 2010].

The interplay of long-term causal tendencies and short-term accidents was something which Montesquieu addressed and makes him a crucial *étape*, to use Raymond Aron's term, in the development of sociological thought [Aron 1967]. We can only guess how things would have been if Gorbachev had lasted no longer than his immediate predecessors. All attempts to construct generalisations about transition confront striking exceptions. The rule of thumb that the further east you are of Berlin or some such reference point, the worse your prospects, is belied by the Baltic states. The presence in the 1980s of a substantial private sector, which I remember an East German loyalist invoking as an explanation of the failure of socialism in Poland, turned out not to make so much difference after its fall. Conversely, we can still see some influence of 19th or early 20th century borders on, for example, Polish electoral preferences between PO-land and PiS-land.

Sociology, I think, is better placed than other so-called disciplines to address complex situations such as this: travelling light, without pre-given assumptions and explanatory protocols. I continue to believe also that somewhere in the borderlands between social democracy and democratic socialism are the best prospects for the future of Europe and the rest of the world.

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A Belated Education

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There is a part of me that wishes I could say that I recognised the importance of the Prague Spring and of its suppression clearly and decisively at the time. I certainly knew about the latter, clearly remembering my mother telling me about it the moment the news came on the radio. She did so with a touch of irritation as I held leftist views about British politics, based on a mild form of socialism leading me to join various protests, most obviously those against the Vietnam war. I certainly did not seek to justify the Warsaw Pact, and I was not close to much of the cultural radicalism of the time—had in fact been rather bemused by the slogans found when passing through Paris in late May. Nonetheless, this eighteen-year old British student simply did not know much about the communist bloc, let alone about the details of the Czechoslovak case. The comment of Milan Kundera quoted by the editor of this symposium is apposite, even though I already lacked any sense of lyricism in such political views as I possessed. Stephen Spender made exactly the same points in his excellent *The Year of the Young Rebels* [Spender 1969]. The relative lack of Western interest in and knowledge of Czechoslovakia is a dreadful fact, but it is one that ought to be acknowledged.

I like to think, however, that I became quite well educated in the sociology of Central Europe—that is, in the workings of a whole world, one that went well beyond the events this issue of this journal memorialises. Four immediate influences were important. The first was listening to a series of lectures on 'Modern Ideologies', given by Ernest Gellner at the London School of Economics in the academic year 1970–1971. Marxism featured heavily here of course, but so too did comments on the different fates of particular countries in the socialist bloc. I remain grateful to those lectures for they helped me find my way into comparative historical sociology. A second influence that then followed was the discovery of Raymond Aron's sociology of liberal capitalism and state socialism. Despite my admiration for his work I must still have considered him somehow to the right, for I remember mild surprise a little later when a young Polish philosopher, exiled for his participation in Solidarity, rushed across the Common Room in the London School of Economics to present Aron with his Solidarity lapel pin, saying in the most moving manner that he was revered in East Central Europe for having

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told the truth. The third influence was simply—at last—immersion in the history of Central Europe, of communism, and of the very different oppositions in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. These three factors in combination most certainly changed my work: liberalism mattered, so to speak, above all, and it rested on pluralism, on power being in separate sets of hands. I should say clearly that I do not think that lesson was generally learnt: to the contrary, the academic world of the 1970s and early 1980s (at least in Britain) remained very much in the grips of marxisant ideas, not least those of Althusser and Poulantzas—and of such followers as Hindess and Hirst. Finally, my intellectual development was massively reinforced by giving lectures for the British Council in Hungary in the early 1980s, thereby seeing a politically stratified society at work together with endless variations in strategies as to how to live within it. This in turn led to massive reading of all sorts on the three countries mentioned, with sustained visits to all three from 1990—above all to Prague given my own heavy involvement in the earliest years of the Central European University.

All those points are general rather than Czechoslovak specific. But I had a long education in Czech matters at the hands of Gellner (as did others, above all those who worked with him in his last years at the Central European University) and want to say something about this—not least as his views were and are much more interesting than mine. I do so as an act of homage to a great Czech patriot. Though the sense of belonging to the country was never, given a Jewish background, total, it was certainly intense: he dreamt of Prague continually in the years after the exile that began in 1939, and of course returned to study in 1945 before going into exile again; he often sang Czech songs with the great Germanist Peter Stern (whose background was rather similar), and proudly played them on his mouth organ; and he returned to Prague after 1989, showing his feelings on one occasion by standing up in Café Slavia once it was restored to sing in front of rather bemused clientele. More importantly, he worked continually on cultural and political developments in the socialist bloc, reviewing endlessly on the current condition of Czechoslovakia. He had a clear view of the Velvet Divorce, and very much admired an essay of Jiří Musil's seeking to explain its structural base [Musil 1993]. Full details of his involvements, and of the other points raised about Gellner, can be found in my biography of this great polymath [Hall 2010].

Gellner's most immediate contribution was concerned with the work of Pavel Machonin. Crucially, he introduced Machonin at a conference on the Prague Spring and its aftermath, held at Ditchley House in 1989. He was fascinated by Machonin's work once it appeared, seeing it as anti-egalitarian for political purposes—the desire to create softer politics by placing power and influence in different sets of hands. He made sure that the work gained maximal attention: his account of 'the pluralist anti-levellers of Prague' saw the light in three different places (first as Gellner [1971]).

But Gellner would not have agreed with the comment of Tony Judt, also quoted by our editor, claiming that the suppression of the Prague Spring dem-

onstrated conclusively that reform communism was an impossibility. This is not to say that he lacked awareness of the situation in the country. Very much to the contrary, he claimed that the harshness of the treatment handed out to the Czechs was related precisely to the fact that they were so advanced. Nonetheless, for a quarter century he worked incessantly on seeking the roots of 'liberalisation' in Central Europe and in Russia, above all amongst Moscow's social anthropologists. The central idea of the conceptual apparatus he developed was simple. Late industrial society was held to depend ever more upon the sophistication of a technical intelligentsia; their style of life rested much more on genuine thought than on ideological strictures. Functional importance would lead sooner or later, Gellner claimed, to a softer political world—perhaps under communism, but a communism deprived of real belief. Skill mattered of course, the ability to demand the right amount—not too little, but also not too much.

In this matter I have come to think that Gellner's Saint-Simonian vision was mistaken theoretically—as of course it was empirically, given the manner of the collapse of the socialist bloc. Bluntly, politics mattered. For one thing, it became clear to me—not least when attending a conference organised by Ota Šik in Frankfurt in the early 1980s—that reform communism was likely to place power in the hands of the lower ranks of the party. States throughout history have been nervous about channels of communication that they can scarcely see. Accordingly, it has been very common to find that states ban horizontal linkages in society so as to privilege their own official means of communication. The reply of Trajan to Pliny (when he was the governor of Bithynia-Pontus) in response to his query as to whether to allow local organisation of a fire brigade in Nicomedia is revealing: such organisation should not even be contemplated, the emperor insisted, for once gathered together minds would drift from fires to politics [Pliny 1969: letters 22–23]. This seemed to me to apply exactly to communist elites. For another, very much depended on Gorbachev being allowed to try to reform communism, something that surely rested on the Soviet Union falling behind in the arms race. This is not to say for a moment that Gorbachev's particular moves were irrelevant, simply to stress a deep structural factor at work.

Bitterness is closely related to love. The reverse side of Gellner's patriotism was irritation and frustration at Czech (and Slovak) behaviour. For one thing, he felt that Dubček's attempt at liberalisation absolutely lacked the skill required. For another, he bemoaned the Czech tendency to give in too quickly, leading him to suggest as a title for one of the short books of the world 'Czech military victories'. In this vein he admired the essays of Petr Pithart [1990], and simply adored Jan Patočka's long letter on the defects of Czechoslovakia as an all-too-modest small state [Patočka 1992]. He would, I think, have written a monograph on the Czechs had he lived, so this is an occasion to mourn his passing.

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A Revealing Journey to Bratislava in 1967

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In the summer of 1967 I was invited to join a delegation of American anti-Vietnam war activists to attend a meeting in Bratislava, where we were to be met by Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, one of the top officials of the National Liberation Front, and a group of North Vietnamese government officials and leaders of various organisations in the north. I was then at the beginning of my academic career, teaching sociology at the University of Chicago. Five years earlier, I'd been part of the group that founded the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the organisational spearhead of the American New Left. SDS, in 1965, had mobilised the first national demonstrations against the Vietnam war. The Bratislava delegation (numbering about 30) was a cross-section of the leadership of anti-war resistance in the US: civil rights activists, student radicals, feminist organisers, clergy, academics, journalists. The meeting had been arranged by Tom Hayden and Dave Dellinger representing the US peace movement and a North Vietnamese US-Vietnam Peace organisation. The meeting was hosted by the official Czechoslovak peace bureaucracy.

When we arrived in Bratislava we found ourselves in a modernistic labour conference centre overlooking the Danube. The town had been badly damaged by bombing and other effects of war during World War II, effects still obvious in 1967.

Meeting with the Vietnamese, of course, had a considerable impact on all of us. It became clear that the message they wanted to convey to the American peace movement was that our emphasis on the Vietnamese people as victims of the war starkly contrasted with their own view, which was that they were effectively resisting the military onslaught of the United States. They had defeated the French in 1954 and they were going to defeat the United States.

That was the message. We found it hard to accept, since the United States was the world's supreme military power and had atomic weapons, if necessary, as a resort.

Their claim that they were going to defeat the United States was not, I felt, simply romantic bravado. They argued that they were able to defeat the American military because they were engaged in guerrilla warfare, which the Ameri-

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cans could not suppress. The more that the United States introduced troops and escalated the size of its presence, the more the Vietnamese people would unite against us. They described particular tactics that would be effective in hamstringing the American effort—tactics that relied on the cooperation of the peasant people who were the base of Vietnamese society.

We didn't realise then that the import of this meeting, in part, was to prepare us for the Tet Offensive, which was to occur six months later. Tet demonstrated some of the truth that the Vietnamese were declaring—namely, that they could launch a military action that would seriously damage the United States' ability to wage the war militarily. The ultimate defeat, they predicted, would come because the American public would see that victory was not possible—just as the French people had decided in 1954. That prediction turned out to be valid.

For me, an important dimension of the experience in Bratislava was the opportunity to encounter Czechoslovakia. Our Czechoslovak communist hosts had arranged a variety of official events that were possibly intended to divert us from that objective. One evening we were taken to the Opera House for a performance of *La Traviata*. This might have been a treat under ordinary tourist experience—but for me it was a waste of precious time.

During the first intermission, a couple of us went outside for some air. There in the Opera Square was a huge throng of young people—the square was a gathering place for the many students of Bratislava. I declared rather loudly how great it would be if someone here spoke English. That attracted the attention of a young man, Tomáš, who spun around and greeted us warmly in English. We quickly established that he was a very cosmopolitan guy who had travelled widely and knew something about the world. He offered to show us around town a bit, which we, of course, were eager to do. We went on a walk and passed the Culture Palace, a refurbished old building on the riverbank, where we heard the sounds of a rock band. Tomáš took us inside to what turned out to be a rehearsal space for one of many rock groups in the cultural underground of Bratislava. They were singing in English, although they didn't know the language.

We learned that, in this highly controlled society, a youth culture with strong interests in what was happening in the West was flourishing. The musicians invited us to their 'cave' and, fascinated and mystified, we followed them. It turned out that they had a clubhouse in the cellar of a bombed-out building. We had to crawl through a tunnel to get to this room. The cave was illuminated by a green light bulb and was plastered with Beatles posters. Their interest in the Beatles—and all things Western—was poignantly coupled with a gesture of welcome. They immediately passed around bread and salt, explaining it as a traditional Slavic way to welcome guests.

They had a tape recording that they wanted us to hear. It was a tape of the Beatles' new album—which we had not yet heard. They had just recorded it off Radio Luxembourg, which at that time was broadcasting into Eastern Europe music that was otherwise unavailable there. That's how I first heard *Sergeant Pepper*.

We talked about our opposition to the draft and the war in Vietnam, and they shared that opposition, because the war, they thought, was diverting resources from the needs of the Czechoslovak people. They wanted it to be over, as much as we did, but for somewhat different reasons. They were hungry for the opportunity to travel, but I was surprised that they weren't especially eager to come to the United States. They seemed more enthusiastic about Scandinavia, seeing it as a place that represented an attractive societal alternative to them. Another surprising political theme was their strong belief that the world had gone downhill since Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy were gone. They wanted to know who we thought had killed Kennedy, and they somehow coupled that assassination with the death of the Beatles' manager Brian Epstein. Despite the fog of controlled media, these kids were forging a countercultural sensibility, literally underground. Something challenging to the status quo was fermenting there as well as in our own world.

Several months later, Czechoslovakia exploded in rebellion. Our encounter with Tomáš and the rock band had given us an advance glimpse of the Prague Spring. My immediate sense, after the conversation in the 'cave', was that the apparent solidity of a severely authoritarian and repressive regime was an illusion. When Slovakia split from Czechoslovakia, twenty years later, and declared its independence, I recalled that one of the main threads of our cellar conversation had to do with a discontent rooted in Slovak nationalism. 'Freedom' for the young musicians meant freedom for expression and personal opportunity, but they also spoke about national autonomy.

Our guide that evening, Tomáš, provided his own intriguing insights into youth consciousness. Early in the evening, he wanted to assure us that he understood that the 'Negro problem' in America was trumped up by Communist Party propaganda and that, anyway, Slovaks and Czechs could understand it because, he said, 'We have to deal with our gypsies'. We, of course, sat him down and lectured him about the reality of racism in the United States. We understood, however, that his remarks were not simply an expression of his own unexamined racism but reflected resistance to official propaganda—whatever 'they' say must be the opposite of truth.

My own experience with communist bureaucracy during our time in Bratislava also gave me glimpses of its character. Indeed, from the outset, it was evident that our Vietnamese counterparts had considerable contempt for the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

On the first day of the conference, we were taken to Bratislava's old town hall, where various city officials delivered lengthy and empty speeches to us. Since that was the first morning I had ever been in a European city, I was restless, and decided to take a stroll. Leaving the official gathering was not, apparently, acceptable behaviour. After walking a block or so, I felt a hand taking my arm, and it was a short Vietnamese guy, who I was to get to know well. He was Do Oanh Xuan, one of the key interpreters for the Vietnamese delegation. I later learned

that virtually every American who went to North Vietnam had close encounters with him. He was in fact in charge of the North Vietnam Peace Committee. As we strolled, Oanh asked me why I thought we were taken to the old town hall, and I said I had no idea. He explained: 'Well, that is the place where Napoleon signed a peace treaty back in the early 19th century, so it has symbolic relevance for the Czechoslovak government and party. They really want us to sign a peace treaty with the Americans, regardless of the cost to us.' I was rather stunned by how casually Oanh opened up a gap between the Vietnamese view of the war and the official Czechoslovak Communist Party line. (And I later learned that the Napoleonic treaty was signed, not at the town hall, but at Primate's Palace. Oanh's error suggested even more mistrust of the Slovaks and Czechs than I'd thought). The local organisers were upset by the fact that the Vietnamese insisted that they not be present during our conference meetings; they professed to be mystified that the Vietnamese would exclude fellow communists while meeting with the non-communist Americans. But in our conversations with the Czechoslovak officials, I never sensed that they were authentically engaged in the mission of the meeting.

Other encounters with the 'peace bureaucrats', as we came to call them, reinforced our sense of the rottenness of this state. I asked one of our interlocutors his view of Franz Kafka; he replied that Kafka was a fairly well-known Jewish writer. Some of the women in our group reported some unwanted sexual advances; others indicated that some of our hosts were eager to exchange dollars for us (which, we suspected, was motivated by an interest in the very obvious currency black market).

Prague 1968 accordingly seemed to me the logical and necessary outcome of the rot and the ferment we had glimpsed in our brief encounter. That encounter had led me to believe that the youth-led rebellion against authoritarian institutions and culture could be transformative, not only in the US and Western Europe but even in the communist-ruled states.

As one of the early proponents of the vision of 'participatory democracy' articulated by the New Left, I conjectured that the subterranean social and cultural stirrings that burst open in 1968 would usher in a long-term process of collective self-assertion—democratisation from the bottom up. 'Socialism with a human face' seemed one way to define that process in Czechoslovak society. Soviet tanks crushed that hope, but I do think that struggles for institutional democratisation continued and expanded in many ways and in many places. The Velvet Revolution appeared to me to be a dramatic fulfilment of such hopes.

Thirty years later, such hopes are hardly remembered in the former Soviet bloc—and in many other places. Sociologists I hope will be trying not only to diagnose the revivals of the authoritarian movement, but to explore the potential for democratising renewal. Czech and Slovak history over the past half century ought to be a fertile terrain for such a quest.

The Prague Spring and the Illusion of Transformational Politics

In Memory of Fred Eidlin

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The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia burst into American politics in the most dramatic way. During a widely viewed hearing of the platform committee of the Democratic Party on 22 August 1968, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, who was testifying in support of the policy of the administration in Vietnam, was informed of the invasion on screen, and rushed to leave the room. I watched this while it occurred. Americans were promptly evacuated from Czechoslovakia [Eidlin 1980: vi]. It was a harsh and shocking reminder of the realities of geopolitics at a time of misbeliefs. The reminders continued: this too was a generational experience. Fred Eidlin, a political scientist whom I only came to know later, was on one of the trains that left. He later returned, only to be arrested, imprisoned, and made an example of on Czech television, before being released.

The year 1968 was already a year of protest, of course in France, with the student revolt, but in many other places. The object of the revolt was obscure. There were direct targets, particularly the war in Vietnam. But other issues, such as university reform, were priorities. And the student movement itself appeared as a historical example of generational conflict, as the contemporary book by Lewis Feuer argued at great length [1969].

The Prague Spring and Alexander Dubček played a particular role in sustaining certain illusions of the time, while the invasion played a role in eliminating others. If there was anything close to a coherent ideology of the student movement and the protests of 1968 in the West, it was 'socialist humanism'. This was a theoretical programme, with a distinguished and highly visible set of protagonists, such as the Marxist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, both products of the Frankfurt School. But some of its most lively expressions were to be found in the Warsaw Pact countries and Yugoslavia. In Prague, Milan Průcha and Karel Kosík were prominent representatives: both were contributors to Fromm's important collection, *Socialist Humanism* [1966]. Fromm also had con-

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tact with Milan Machovec, who played a prominent role in introducing the idea of a Christian-Marxist dialogue.¹

Socialist Humanism was premised on a view of Marxism that originated in the idea of going beyond what later came to be called 'real existing socialism'. The guiding idea was that humanism by itself was not enough, and that socialism in the material sense was also not enough, but that something new and better, a new and better humanism, could be built on the achievements of socialism, and that there needed to be what some of the commentators called a spiritual element to this new order. This element was not the old humanism, which was infected with bourgeois ideology or something even more retrograde, but a humanism appropriate for people liberated from bourgeois oppression.

Ernst Bloch explained true human emancipation in this way: 'our fellow men will no longer be, as in the egoistic, Bourgeois phase of the Rights of Man, checks and hindrances upon our freedom, but all men will live together in a community of freedom' [Bloch 1966: 227]. This was the phase which these countries were taken to be on the verge of achieving. The phrase 'community of freedom' nicely captures its twin goals: freedom from repression and mutual solidarity.

It was widely believed in the West that the thinkers—mostly philosophers—of Soviet bloc countries had a kind of special access to an understanding of this future humanism. Fromm was especially entranced and motivated by this idea [Friedman 2013: 238]. They had been purged, at least externally, of bourgeois oppression, so *their* talk of freedom meant something different than bourgeois talk about freedom, or even the talk of the emancipation of people still under a bourgeois order.

The Prague Spring, and Dubček himself, appeared, in the light of this general story line, not so much as a sign of the fragility and ultimate failure of the system of Soviet rule or the communist project, but as a confirmation of the basic story: 'socialism' could be freed of its repressive aspects, its authoritarian trappings, its cults of personality, and so forth. These aspects were confirmed, by Dubček's actions and the response to them in Czechoslovakia, to be merely accidental features of 'real existing socialism'. The events were, in a broader sense, a confirmation of the basic idea of socialist humanism. Eliminate the repressive apparatus and a community of freedom would follow. Dubček was not seen as responding to internal pressures generated by the rule of the Communist Party or the oppressive apparatus of the state. He was seen as taking the path that socialist humanism had prophesied. The slogan 'Socialism with a Human Face' was the perfect articulation of the idea of socialist humanism.

¹ Cf. Moltmann, who provides an account of the meetings that preceded the Prague Spring and a glimpse of the character of Machovec as well as of the divisions between thinkers who were part of the movement and those associated with authoritarian communism [Moltmann 2009: 119–128].

The illusory image of Soviet Europe

The idea that true emancipation was immanent in these societies fit with the central belief of many leftist Western commentators about actually existing socialism: that the core intentions and goals of Marxism and its critique of 'bourgeois society' were correct, and that all that had gone wrong was their practical application in Russia, and that its mistakes, or justifiable reactions, were the product, entirely or largely, of capitalist resistance and antagonism. It was this antagonism, by this logic, that was the real evil in modern society, and the United States was the chief source of this antagonism and therefore the chief obstacle to progress.

This had become enlightened opinion by 1968. 'Conservatives' in the United States had kept alive the idea of 'captive nations'. These nations were listed on a large billboard across from the United Nations building in New York, to the ridicule of their more sophisticated contemporaries. For them, John Foster Dulles, who departed before the 1960s, was seen as a relic and a warmonger, though he had been all talk and no action about Eastern Europe. Complaints about Soviet hegemony were seen as an obstacle to world peace and a continuation of the worst impulses of the Cold War. Intellectuals, especially, proclaimed their faith in 'convergence'. Eastern Europe was to be taken as a model of enlightened Soviet protection, suffering only as a result of the general problem of Western hostility. It was even treated as a source of inspiration prior to the Prague Spring. The fact that Radio Free Europe had an avid following of listeners to its Jazz programmes was taken as a sign of the underlying fraternity between enlightened Westerners and Eastern Europeans, and as a sign also that things were not so bad, or backward, in these countries.

The convenient implication of this reasoning was that the actualities of the Soviet Union could be ignored, and the theory of human emancipation through socialism saved. This had an important consequence for the attitude of the Western Left to Eastern Europe—a category in which Czechoslovakia was put, however unwillingly and ungeographically. The experiences of Eastern Europe under Soviet hegemony and as part of the Warsaw Pact were deprived of meaning. To be sure, in 1956 the Hungarian uprising and Khrushchev's speech on Stalin had caused many intellectuals who were party members to resign. But this did not change their basic political orientation, or their faith in the realisation of a community of freedom through socialism. By 1968 only an older generation had any memory of the Hungarian uprising, and to mention it marked one out as a political primitive, allied to Cold War Manicheanism.

The Soviet invasion dispelled the illusion that Soviet actualities could be forgiven, precisely because the invasion had no excuse: Dubček was a loyal communist; there was no 'threat to socialism' to be eliminated, no good intentions hidden behind the invasion, no higher purpose for the cause of socialism. There was no good storyline to justify it, in part because, as Fred Eidlin argued, there was no coherent process of decision that led to it [1980]. It was a more or less

mindless reaction against a threat to the status quo. But it revealed fear—fear of the benign development that socialist humanism envisioned and which the Prague Spring embodied.

What does the Prague Spring mean today?

Among the events of 1968, the Prague Spring and the repression that followed stand out. Unlike the student movements, this was not merely a protest: it was a collective political experience of the whole society, led by the state itself. It was an attempt to realise a new, humane order, a community of freedom, derived from the philosophy of Marx, Hegel, and the existentialists, perhaps—an idea that played a special role in Prague—with a spiritual element derived from Christianity. This is what Milan Průcha saw in these sources: a shared understanding of alienation. The future community was to be alienation-free: ‘by the creation of a new kind of social relationship, etc., the individual can gain new possibilities for liberating himself from his egocentric isolation and for participating in the being of all mankind’ [Průcha 1966: 161].

The Soviet invasion, by cutting the Prague project off, inadvertently preserved the idea that a new order, genuinely humane and free of repression, could be created by a collective act of what Durkheim called fusion, in which the collective consciousness and therefore the conditions of human relations are transformed. Because there was no aftermath in which practical matters of human relations needed to be worked out, there was no failure. There was merely the external and accidental fact of the Soviet invasion.

The idea of radical change through collective fusion was given a kind of confirmation a year later, almost to the day, by the ‘three days of peace and music’ of the Woodstock festival. This event was taken to be a sign that, left to their own devices and free of the repressive apparatus of the state and of traditional sexual mores, a new form of community could be created, without a plan, without rulers, without violence, and without coercion. The same idea is repeated in many variations elsewhere. The possibility of such a transformation defines much of the contemporary American and French discussion of ‘the political’ and ‘democracy’ [cf. Wolin 1996: 31; Wolin 1994: 11; Xenos 2001: 31–32; Brown 2001: 4–5]. Jacques Rancière summarises the appropriation of this idea by political theory:

Genuine participation is the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street, the invention of a movement born of nothing but democracy itself. The guarantee of permanent democracy is not the filling up of all the dead times and empty spaces by the forms of participation or of counterpower; it is the continual renewal of the actors and of the forms of their actions, the ever-open possibility of the fresh emergence of this fleeting subject. The test of democracy must ever be in democracy’s own image: versatile, sporadic—and founded on trust. [Rancière 2007 (1992): 60–61].

‘Genuine participation’ is an echo of Bloch’s ‘genuine community’. Political structures merely stand in its way. The transformative moment of collective emotion is genuine democracy; having the possibility of the emergence of this collective subject ‘ever-present’ is the test of democracy.

In retrospect, the writings of the socialist humanists were distinguished by one striking feature: the absence of any analysis of actual politics. The language of dis-alienation and emancipation pointed to a glimmering ideal that transcended the grubby realities of political community, authority, law, and the limits to the possibility of human transformation. Similarly, what we might call ‘the Woodstock theory of democracy’, promoted by thinkers like Sheldon Wolin, regards actual political structures as impediments to genuine democracy rather than necessary instruments for its realisation.

These two groups of thinkers thus share a certain blindness, which the after-effects of the Soviet invasion revealed. It is a feature of the East-West divide that in the West the effects following the shock of the invasion were psychic, while in the East they were concrete. In the West there was disappointment. The fate of the Czech socialist humanists was imprisonment, exile, early death, or dismissal. This was tangible, actual repression. The leading figures who promulgated the basic story outlined above lived freely and profited handsomely in America or West Germany. This was a difference that did not fit the basic story: bourgeois repression was supposed to be the most fundamental form of repression.

While the Soviet invasion inadvertently preserved the illusion of the possibility of radical collective transformation, it destroyed the ideas of convergence and of the immanent development of genuine community in the societies freed of bourgeois repression. It destroyed the illusion that the experience of freedom from bourgeois repression conferred some sort of higher wisdom: thinkers like Adam Schaff [1966], who was lionised during this period, were befuddled by what came after. Schaff himself opposed the Solidarity movement in Poland. The Woodstock theory of democracy is a replacement of the ideals of socialist humanism, and a tacit admission of their lack of inevitability. It is a version instead of the Sorelian idea of transformation, in which the means are known, but the destination is not. This was not what the socialist humanists or the participants in the Prague Spring thought they were promoting. But it is what was left for the children of socialist humanism to believe in when the ‘real existing socialist’ regimes failed to reform, and after most of them ceased to exist.

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