

# **Alternative Czech Leftist Discourses on History during the Early 1990s**

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## **Abstract**

The collapse of communist regimes instigated a strong belief that liberal democracy was the sole democratic model that should constitute a new political order. This conviction was closely connected with the new reinterpretations of national histories and rediscovery of new “national traditions”. In the Czech case, a new dominant liberal-conservative interpretation of Czech historical development appeared, which was based on emphasizing liberal democratic traditions and the Czech affiliation to the West. However prevailing this interpretation was, alternative voices existed in Czech society as well which refused such conceptions of Czech historical development and provided an alternative historical interpretation.

Within the Czech Left alternative discourses existed which articulated a specific interpretation of the Czech post-war development and at the same time provided an alternative interpretation of the changes following 1989. In the case of the Czech left, the legacy of and inspiration from the 1989 democratic revolutions and their political thought is not merely a confirmation of Western liberal democratic values. It provides a variety of ways and modes of thinking, which remained present in the post-1989 political discourse and which led to formulations of alternative concepts of democracy and historical “democratic traditions”.

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## Introduction

During November 1989, people did not want a return to capitalism. They wanted socialism without deformation, but they did not expect to return fifty years back. It is big question, whether they would support the Civic Forum if the CF would declare that its program is a return to capitalism. It used to be generally proclaimed that every socialist alternative must be excluded, it used to be said that it is scientifically known.<sup>1</sup>

Egon Bondy, 24.11.1990

In 1990 in an interview for the newspaper *Rude Právo*, Czech radical leftist thinker Egon Bondy declared that “leftism” is an inherent part of Czech political culture and pointed out that “leftist political traditions are very strong within the Czech political thought since a long time, more than one hundred years; since the time of T. G. Masaryk, Czech politics is in fact left-centrist, but in no case on the Right.”<sup>2</sup>

In this statement Bondy reacted to the “mysterious” change that happened a short time after 1989, as people started to massively support capitalist reforms. During the last years, several research attempts were made to show that during 1989 the majority of Czech society called for improving socialism and did not expect a transformation to capitalism.<sup>3</sup> In his book *Revolution with Human Face* American historian James Krapfl analyses the general “people’s demands” during the Velvet Revolution. He shows how during the first revolutionary weeks, one of the main demands was “better” and “non-deformed” socialism.<sup>4</sup> Krapfl also shows that many

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<sup>1</sup> Egon Bondy, “Marxista a opozičník” in: *Rudé Právo: příloha Haló sobota*, N. 2., 24. 11. 1990. p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Egon Bondy, “Marxista a opozičník”, *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See James Krapfl, *Revolúcia s ľudskou tvárou: politika, kultúra a spoločnosť v Československu po 17. novembri 1989*, Bratislava: Kalligram, 2009; see Michal Pullmann, *Konec Experimentu: přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*, Praha: Scriptorium, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> James Krapfl, *Ibid.*, p. 131.

people understood the new social change as a “continuation of that what began in 1968, a continuation of the former social reconstruction and democratization.”<sup>5</sup>

This fact was reflected later by many “disappointed” leftist thinkers who interpreted the November change through their socialist positions and refused to accept the massive intervention of capitalism; as former reform communist and leftist dissident Jaroslav Šabata wrote:

“It seemed that during the early 1990s the relation to the traditionally leftist values of modern Czechness was turned inside out. At the post-1989 political scene an idea started to be emphasized that the meaning of 1989 is transformation to capitalism. But this idea was distinct from the general mood of Velvet Revolution.”<sup>6</sup>

My purpose here is not to provide an overall explanation of this general “change of the mood”. Rather, I focus on that political thought which did not accept this change and which criticized the capitalist transformation.

The ascendancy of (neo)liberal principles in Central European societies following the collapse of communist regimes instigated the strong belief that liberal democracy was the sole democratic model that should constitute the new political order. This conviction was closely connected with the new reinterpretations of national histories and finding of new “national traditions”. In the Czech case, a new dominant liberal-conservative interpretation of Czech historical development appeared, which was based on emphasizing the liberal democratic traditions and the Czech affiliation to the West.<sup>7</sup> However prevailing this interpretation was, alternative voices existed in the Czech society as well which refused such conceptions of Czech historical development and provided an alternative historical interpretation.

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<sup>5</sup> James Krapfl, *Ibid*, p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Šabata, “Co se děje s Čechy?”, in: *Listy*, N. 3, 1994, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> See Adéla Gjuríčová et al. *Rozdělení minulosti: vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989*, Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2011.

In my thesis I argue that within the Czech Left alternative discourses existed which articulated a specific interpretation of the Czech post-war development and at the same time provided an alternative interpretation of the changes following 1989. In the case of the Czech left, the legacy of and inspiration from the 1989 democratic revolutions and their political thought is not merely a confirmation of Western liberal democratic values. It provides a variety of ways and modes of thinking, which remained present in the post-1989 political discourse and which led to formulations of alternative concepts of democracy and historical “democratic traditions”.

Because coming to terms with communist past became one of the most characteristic phenomenon of the 1990s and historical argumentation held an exclusive position within the general political argumentation, I focus on the historical discourse. I show how the people who did not accept the forthcoming capitalism continuously defended their “socialist” or “leftist” interpretation of 1989 and emphasized their “alternative” historical explanation. Generally my question is: which leftist historical tradition were revived after 1989, by whom, and how they were related to the dominant historical narrative.

### Definition of the main analytical category

In my thesis I analyze “leftist alternative discourses”, those discourses which opposed the new dominant anti-communist interpretation of history. However general the category of “alternative Left” is, I provide a definition by pointing out several common characteristics:

- 1) Declaration of Czech radical left’s own leftist identity, which means understanding their own political position as a leftist position
- 2) A critique of dominant historical discourse (politics of history, politics of memory)

- 3) Defining themselves against free-market capitalism and arguing for social-market economy
- 4) A critique of Western civilization or some of its features

Very broadly we can follow Ondřej Císař's definition of *post-revolutionary Left*. Although it is not entirely precise for the situation in post-communist states, it might indicate the direction of a part of Czech leftist thought. Post-revolutionary left takes into the consideration an unsuccessful attempt to establish a communist utopia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and produces a radical criticism of liberal democracy. In the historical context of the "liberal consensus" it applies to an idea of individual autonomy, but refuses this ideal in its liberal conception and trying to find another ways how to fulfil it and at the same time does not resign to an establishing of a social equally society without any significant social differences.<sup>8</sup>

### Historical context

Leftist political thought has a strong tradition within Czech political thought, especially after 1918. In Czechoslovakia, the intelligentsia did not reject communism as strongly as in the rest of the Eastern Europe.<sup>9</sup> The phenomenon of „the leftist intellectual“ – who was influential in cultural circles – was not exceptional. On the contrary, the majority of cultural production was in some sense leftist, socially sensitive and proclaimed ideals of “socialism”, which was not solely connected with Marxist conceptions; rather we would find “variety of socialisms” ranged from the ideas of liberal socialist thinkers such as Karel Čapek or Ferdinand Peroutka up to dogmatic Stalinist ideas of social realism of S. K. Neumann. Such differentiation can be made

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<sup>8</sup> Pavel Barša, Ondřej Císař, *Levice v postrevoluční době: občanská společnost a nová sociální hnutí v radikální politické teorii 20. Století*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2004. p. 24

<sup>9</sup> See Jan Křen, *Dvě století střední Evropy*, Praha: Argo, 2005.

in the term “communism” as well. The idea of communism was not solely connected with the official position of the Communist party. Even within the Communist party many intellectual streams existed. Within the Czechoslovak cultural field we can also define many “independent” movements proclaiming ideas of communism, especially within avant-garde movement. A not insignificant fact is that both interwar Czechoslovak presidents sympathized with socialist ideas.<sup>10</sup> After the Second World War and especially after the communist takeover of power in February 1948 this rich tradition of leftist political thought disappeared and a rightist direction began to be stressed.<sup>11</sup> The other directions such as liberal socialism, Avant-garde movement or non-Stalinist communism were rejected and generally seen as “right deviations”.

The partial revision of the huge leftist intellectual tradition came during the reform process of 1960s when many forgotten and forbidden traditions started to be renewed and helped people to come to terms with the Czech Stalinist past. During the sixties, applying to the national non-Stalinist, democratic leftist traditions affirmed the legitimacy of democratization during the Prague Spring.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the democratization was foiled by Soviet occupation and for a long time various leftist traditions could not be officially proclaimed and their legacy resonated either within the dissidents or not at all.

Even after 1989 the leftist democratic and non-Stalinist tradition of Czech political thinking did not achieve wider attention. The concepts of socialism, communism and Left in general were disqualified as a result of its association with the former communist regime, the rejection of which formed the basis of post-communist democratic identities. Few attempts of reviving these

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rupnik, *Dějiny Komunistické strany Československa: od počátků do převzetí moci*, Praha: Academia, 2002, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> See Jiří Knapík, *V zajištění moci: kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři 1948-1956*, Praha: Libri, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See *Pražské jaro 1968: literatura - film - média: materiály z mezinárodní konference pořádané Literární akademii za spolupráce s Městskou knihovnou Praha 20.-22. května 2008*, Praha: Literární akademie, 2009; see Jiří Hoppe, *Opozice '68: sociální demokracie, KAN a K 231 v období pražského jara*. Vyd. 1. Praha: Prostor, 2009.

traditions within Czech historical discourse were made during the early 1990s, which I intend to describe.

### Structure of the thesis

The first chapter shows overall post-1989 political discourse to which the Left must face. I show how the leftist political language and its concepts were disqualified. Using the term socialism was problematic because it contained the specific layer of a “totalitarian” experience. Thus reviving socialist, although democratic, ideas required a specific rhetorical strategy which continuously stressed democratic nature of “new” socialism and rejected a connection with the communist past.

The second chapter is concerned with the most important post-1989 attempt to return the Czech socialist tradition to the Czech political discourse; the tradition of the Prague Spring. It is the only chapter where I use the term “collective memory” because it was revived by the former reform communists (so called “Sixtyeighters”) who personally participated in the Prague Spring democratization.

The third chapter describes the problematic position in which Czech Communist Party was found after 1989. Through the historical discourse and searching for its own democratic traditions they were trying to legitimize their political position within the new democratic political system. Because Prague Spring tradition was for post-normalization communist elite with its “non-reformist” identity practically inapplicable (with few exceptions), they found “different” national democratic tradition in the legacy of Bohumír Šmeral and his non-Stalinist, democratic and national road to socialism.

Both previous traditions strongly stressed their national and democratic nature and at the same time they abandoned the revolutionary vocabulary. In the last chapter I show the political discourse of Czech radical Left which refused nationalism as a political value and which still used politically radical language in order to express their claims. Nevertheless, as I show, no systematic attempt of revision certain historical legacy has appeared within the Czech Radical Left.

### Literature and current research

Research in the field of political thought and intellectual history in Czech academic environment does not have any tradition. In the field of contemporary history there is only one work which explicitly applies to the methods of intellectual history: Michal Kopeček's book *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce (In Quest of the Revolution's Lost Meaning. Marxist Revisionism in Central Europe 1953-1960)*<sup>13</sup> describing the origins of Marxist revisionism in Central Europe in the middle of 1950s. In the broader range we can put into this research area the book written by Michal Pullmann: *Konec experimentu (The End of The Experiment)*<sup>14</sup> where he analyses transformations by using the key political concepts during the time of the Czechoslovak reconstruction in late 1980s. The insight into the mental world of the Czech post-1989 society provides a collective monograph of the historian from the Institute of Contemporary History *Rozdělení minulostí: vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989 (Divided by the Past: Political Identities Formation in the Czech Republic after 1989)*<sup>15</sup>. This book is focused on the formation of Czech political culture and political-cultural

<sup>13</sup> Michal Kopeček, *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce*, Praha: Argo, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Michal Pullmann, *Konec Experimentu: přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*, Praha: Scriptorium, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Adéla Gjuríčová et al. *Rozdělení minulostí: vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989*, Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2011.

identities after 1989. It shows how important the interpretation of the communist past was to Czech society. It is one of the most recent works on Czech political thought; dealing with the topic of political identities in the Czech Republic after 1989. This work is crucial for me as it assists me in locating my results within the Czech political spectrum.

Regarding the research on the political Left after 1989, the range of material is much broader. Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of the production came from the research of political science and is concerned mainly with the constitution of the newly emerged leftist political parties and their role within the political system, possibly it offers comparisons of transformations of the communists parties in Central Europe.<sup>16</sup>

The fate of the Czech radical left in 1990s is elaborated by Martin Bastl in the book *Radikální levice v České republice: devadesátá léta dvacátého století* (*The radical Left of the 1990's Czech Republic*)<sup>17</sup>. It is an overview of the fundamental groups and movements within the Czech radical left, though minimal space is devoted to the intellectual background of the movement and the whole book is focused more on the organization structure of the Czech radical left. The only attempt to describe the Czech radical left in more long-term perspective is the tiny and methodologically poorly-anchored work from Pavel Pečínka: *Pod rudou vlajkou proti KSČ: osudy radikální levice v Československu* (*"Under the Red Flag Against CCP: Czechoslovak Radical Left"*)<sup>18</sup>. Pečínka describes the Czech radical left since 1920s, yet similarly to Bastl he follows especially institutional development of the radical leftist movement and does not offer consist analysis of its political thought.

<sup>16</sup> See for example: Lubomír Kopeček, *Trajectories of the Left: social democratic and (ex-)communist parties in contemporary Europe: between past and future*, Brno: CDK, 2005; Vít Holoušek and Lubomír Kopeček eds. *Rudí a růžoví: transformace komunistických stran*, Brno: CDK, 2002; Petr Fiala et al., *Komunismus v České republice: vývojové, systémové a ideové aspekty působení KSČM a dalších komunistických organizací v české politice*, Brno, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Bastl, *Radikální levice v České republice: devadesátá léta dvacátého století*, Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, Mezinárodní politologický ústav, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Pavel Pečínka, *Pod rudou vlajkou KSČ: osudy radikální levice v Československu*, Brno: Doplněk, 1999.

The specific problem of (re)writing post-1989 historiography in Central-Eastern Europe is reflected in two main anthologies *Narratives unbound*<sup>19</sup> and *(Re)Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*.<sup>20</sup>

Theoretically I situate my thesis within the interpretation which question liberal interpretation of 1989 changes. As I mentioned above in the past decade, a significant part of the social-scientific research started to noticeably refuse the liberal interpretation of democratic transformation. By defining themselves against the famous “Fukuyama paradigm” of the triumph of liberalism, these approaches search for an alternative legacy of the “annus mirabilis” and offer new readings of the social and political changes following 1989. For my thesis the book from James Krapfl, *Revolution with Human face*<sup>21</sup> and Michal Pullmann’s *Konec experiment (The End of the Experiment)* are most inspiring. My thesis aims at contributing to this field by searching for an “alternative” intellectual legacy of 1989, which appeared in the form of a leftist critique of newly emerging capitalism.

Last year I submitted my MA thesis at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague about the “Czech Alternative Left”. My current thesis is partly informed by some of my previous results, especially in the second chapter focusing on the memory of the Prague Spring.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sorin Antohi, ed., Balázs Trencsényi, ed., Péter Apor, ed. *Narratives unbound: historical studies in post-communist Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Ulf Brunnbauer, ed. *(Re)Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, Münster: Lit Verlag Münster, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> James Krapfl, *Revolúcia s ľudskou tvárou: politika, kultúra a spoločenstvo v Československu po 17. novembri 1989*, Bratislava: Kalligram, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Kristina Andělová, *Česká nekomunistická levice po roce 1989 a myšlení alternativ*, Master Thesis, Institute of Czech History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, 2013.

## Troubles with concepts: Using the term socialism in the time of the “death of socialism”

Instead of speaking about the collapse of communism, which is typical in the West, people here speak about the collapse of socialism. But socialism never collapsed. It might seem so only to those people who equated socialism with real existing socialism, Soviet socialism and Normalization.<sup>23</sup>

Ivan Sviták, 1991

Socialist International or Social Democratic parties are not organizations which may be condemned by a mocking or general rejection. We, socialist or revolutionary Marxist, were always speaking against the idea expressed in unison by both the Western Right and local Stalinists that the political system in Czechoslovakia and USSR was socialism.<sup>24</sup>

Petr Uhl, 1991

According to Reinhart Koselleck's definition of political concepts, in concepts we can define specific “historical layers”.<sup>25</sup> These historical layers have become a part of political concepts, their meaning and their usage. Theoretically they can be separated and defined, but in historical reality they are always bound together and affect the meaning and perception of the concrete concept. In this chapter I intend to show how the “totalitarian layer” of the term socialism affected its using and perceiving of this word.

The political languages of leftist socialism found themselves in a defensive position after 1989. The concept of socialism was “discredited” by previous usage of communist propaganda. During the late 1980s the term socialism became “empty” and had above all a legitimization function for communist rule without any discussions about its meaning.<sup>26</sup> This meant that after

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<sup>23</sup> Ivan Sviták, *Ekonomické legendy aneb Tobogan do Bolívie?*, Praha: Borgis, 1991, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Petr Uhl, „Levice musí být odpovědná. Rozhovor s Petrem Uhlem, vedla Marie Königová” in: *Rudé Právo*, N.3, 26. 4. 1991, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, “Introduction” in: Werner Conze, ed., Reinhart Koselleck, ed. and Otto Brunner, ed. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972.

<sup>26</sup> See Michal Pullmann, *Konec experimentu*, Praha: Scriptorium, 2011.

1989 few people took this political term seriously and believed in the “renovation” of socialism in public eyes.

A “totalitarian” layer of the term socialism and the whole experience with 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet socialism could not be simply forgotten, as an “unsuccessful project” which can be revised. In the time of overall “triumph of liberalism” socialism was generally seen as a “death project”. This belief was noticeable not only within the post-socialist states; also many significant western intellectuals, such as Ralf Dahrendorf, Francis Fukuyama, Peter Berger or Anthony Giddens declared the “death of socialism”. They saw socialism as a political system with totalitarian tendencies which are not compatible with democratic principles.<sup>27</sup> According to these authors there is no successful way to connect democracy and socialism. Socialism can be established only as a dictatorship, because it depends on the appropriation of the private property. Capitalism, on the contrary, creates the space for political control which is necessary for real democratic principles.

Thus those who used the term socialism in their political program after 1989 had to face its “totalitarian” legacy. By analyzing Czech leftist post-socialist thought, it is evident that coming to terms with totalitarian legacy was one of the biggest problems for all socialist thinkers. They did not face just a rejection of any socialist ideas, but after socialism a great part of the Czech society refused also any idea of the Left. Leftist politicians had to frequently face similar statements as those which right-wing conservative-liberal ideologist Miloslav Bednář expressed:

“In democratic systems political Right represents an authentic democratic politic stream, whereas Left usually represents non-civic, totalitarian pattern with administrative paternalism with its comfort, which is frequently connected with non-realistic ideas

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<sup>27</sup> See Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, Transaction Publishers, 1990; see Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, London: Penguin Books, 1992.

about possibilities of the “third way”, often also with the wave of an impetuous acceptance of feminism and ecologic biases.”<sup>28</sup>

In this vein we can assert that post-1989 political thought is characteristic by it striving of “remove” this totalitarian layer from the term socialism. As the title quotes show leftist thinkers chose a rhetorical strategy which should make clear that “their” socialism is not the same as “communist”, respectively “totalitarian” socialism. If we can identify one common feature for all statements about socialism after 1989 it was this “strategy of purification”. For some authors a need for separating themselves from the “old regime” was so strong that the only characteristic we can identify in their usage of term socialism that the “new” socialism will be entirely different from the old one. It was also given by general “tone” of the public discussion. A strict renunciation of “totalitarian” past practically represented a “ticket” to the public discussion.

This fact that communist rule just “misused” a concept of socialism for its own legitimization was not something that would appear with the year 1989. We can find reflections on such problems in the work of several leftist dissidents, for example Petr Uhl, Jaroslav Šabata or Miloš Hájek.<sup>29</sup> Finally we would find the articulation of the strong contradiction between communist ideology and its “real existing” praxis also in Václav Havel’s most famous essay *Moc Bezmocných* (*The Power of Powerless*).<sup>30</sup>

In this sense we can claim that the early 1990s discussion on socialism generally followed the motto: either socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all.’ Thus if we describe the discussion about socialism after 1989 we describe also the “struggle” of the term democracy. The new liberal consensus brought a strong belief in the idea of the liberal democracy and idea

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<sup>28</sup> Miloslav Bednář, “O jedné demagogii”, in: *Literární Noviny*, N. 4, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> See Petr Uhl et al, *Program společenské samosprávy*, Köln: Index, 1989; see Miloš Hájek, *Paměť české levice*, Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 201.

<sup>30</sup> Václav Havel, “Moc Bezmocných” in: Václav Havel, *O lidskou identitu*, Praha: Rozmluvy, 1990.

of political plurality and political democracy overshadowed the other conception of democracy (social and economic). In the eyes of more radical part of the Left liberal democracy was insufficient. Many former reform communists, post-1989 communists, or anarchists called for a more direct form of democracy.<sup>31</sup> They did not completely question the representative democracy, but they argued that representative democracy is not able to ensure a real participation of all people on the important political decisions. According to these thinkers the only real democracy could be a socialist democracy (equally used with the term democratic socialism). Liberal democracy provides equality before the law, but it cannot cancel social differences.

In Czech modern history serious attempts of connection socialism and democracy have appeared several times. Above all we can find it in the political thought of Austro-Marxist Bohumír Šmeral, pre-1921 Social Democrat and later founder of Czechoslovak Communist Party, who was taking into consideration the specific nature of Central European multi-national space and promoting a specific regional/national road to socialism with respect to the democratic principles. The second strong revival of idea of democratic socialism in the form of “people’s democracy” appeared shortly after the Second World War when the Right-wing political parties were banned.<sup>32</sup> Despite the quite rich legacy of that time socialist thinkers few references were made later to this period. The third and probably most “famous” attempt to create an alternative to the both western capitalism and Soviet dogmatic bureaucratic socialism was made during the reform process in the 1960s. The concept of democratic socialism was declined in each fall. Many believed it represented a unique political program that proved the democratic non-violent nature of Czech nation. The public life started to be pluralized, many

<sup>31</sup> František Dryje, Je pro mne ještě zajímavá demokracie?. *Sociologické aktuality*, N. 9, 1992, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> See Christiane Brenner, *"Zwischen Ost und West": tschechische politische Diskurse 1945-1948*. München: Oldenbourg, 2009.

new clubs and associations were created, and cultural production was huge. Nevertheless it was still a limited plurality. Many political issues were still censored (as for example political trials with non-communists) and those who were not the members of Communist Party still could not fully participate in the public life. Finally, just within an inch of re-establishing Social Democratic Party, Soviet army invaded. Despite this fact, Prague Spring became in the political language of post-1989 socialists the most frequently used reference to the “positive” tradition of Czech communism. Through the references to this historical period different conception of democracy was stressed, as well as a critique of forthcoming communism.

## Memory of the Prague Spring

“The unfinished legacy of 1968 and the unfinished legacy of 1989 are two same challenges of our future”<sup>33</sup>

Ivan Sviták, 1992

Coming to terms with the past was one of the characteristic phenomena of 1990s’ politics and was connected with the concrete political praxis called “politics of history” and “politics of memory”. The first case represents the institutionalization and legalization of the relation of Czech society to the recent past (the communist period 1948-1989); the second case represents the attempt to take advantage of certain concrete forms of political memory which served to enforce specific social-political goals.<sup>34</sup> Such political methods naturally caused various conflicts which arose from the “plurality of memories” and different attitudes to the whole communist period. Within the Czech society, these conflicts were evident from the beginning of the democratic transformation.

Similar to the other countries of Central Europe, the Czechoslovak post-communist democracy built its legitimacy on the rejection of the communist experience; the new legitimacy was based on the “founding myth” of the heroic overthrow of communism and the distance from the “old regime”.<sup>35</sup> The relation to the past was perceived as one of the key aspects of the formulation of political identity in the new post-communist space.<sup>36</sup> The negative attitude to the communist past has become a constitutive feature of new political culture and in order to enter to the public discussion each new political identity had to openly and clearly reject the communism.

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<sup>33</sup> Ivan, Sviták “Smysl Jara“, in: *Levý Blok: Dialektika voleb*, Praha: SAKKO, 1992. p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Michal Kopeček, Úvod, in: Adéla Gjuričová et al., *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>35</sup> Françoise Mayer, *Češi a jejich komunismus: paměť a politická identita*. Praha: Argo, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> see Adéla Gjuričová et al., *Ibid.*

By analysing the post-1989 discussions on communist history we can identify the most significant “disturbing” feature of the articulation of collective memory of the Prague Spring. Publically the Prague Spring was mostly perceived as a “positive exception” within the Czech communist rule. “Golden sixties” was the title it was given, which alluded especially to the cultural sphere – literature, movies or philosophy of this time were (and still are) considered the most quality cultural production of the history of Czech modern culture.

Nevertheless, a widely spread interpretation saw that the Prague Spring had no chance to succeed because politically it was still just power-struggle within the Communist Party; when reformers began to demand plurality, Soviet tanks came to restore order.

The anti-communist interpretation of Prague Spring was very strong after 1989; especially towards Sixtyeighters who wanted to return to high politics. Mostly because of their Stalinist past they did not find sympathy for their future political career ambitions. Sixtyeighters repeatedly reminded the people of their political merit during the Prague Spring, which should have affirmed their political identity. Yet many critics stressed that Prague Spring was not a fully democratic project and that privileged social groups still existed. The democracy was not for all; many people had absolutely no chance to enter the public sphere:

“When you argue that the most important reformist came from the Communist Party it was simply because the rest of people, who would probably reform the society much more vehemently or they would do something which would never cause communism in Czechoslovakia; all these people were pushed aside, silenced or liquidated. It was only your game.”<sup>37</sup>

Such statements expressed by young Czech that time right-wing journalist Josef Chuchma in 1992 was not unusual at the Czech political scene. Whereas most of former reform communists (Sixtyeighters) perceived Prague Spring as their personal success that was destroyed “from the outside,” the majority of Czech post-communist society perceived the history of Prague Spring

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<sup>37</sup> Josef Chuchma, “Ještě k osmašedesátnickému studiu Netopýr” in: *Tvar*, N. 5, 1992, p. 2.

as a “proof” of the impossibility of reformation of Soviet communism. Similar to the Chuchma, another right-wing journalist Karel Steigerwald argued against Sixtyeighters:

“They are against the hardness of the new economic reform of elegant dandies as if they alone did not create the reasons for such hardness. There is only one word they do not have in their political language: responsibility to their work. Disaster, they believe, came with the Russian occupation. Just the only one thing they surprisingly do not connect: their own communist idealism and their communist praxis with current situation of our country. They believe that their inner struggle with Moscow in which they lost – and after non-direct occupation of Czech nation they provide a direct occupation – has absolved them of their guilt.”<sup>38</sup>

The new dominant, mostly anti-communist, historical discourse has created a space for a new interpretation of Czech national history. We can assert that the debate over “The meaning of Czech history” continued, above all in the background of the geopolitical discussions and debates about the “return to Europe”. Advocates of the new dominant historical interpretation moved away from the idea of the Czech nation as the “bridge between East and West” and following Josef Pekař’s national interpretation; they pointed out the Czech organic affiliation with the West, specifically the affiliation with Germans. The historical relationship between Czechs and Germans, one of the fundamental pillars of all interpretations of historical development of the Czech nation, was radically reinterpreted and became undoubtedly one of the most discussed historical topics within the Czech historiography of the time.<sup>39</sup> The 40-year experience under Soviet rule brought a shift from the traditional “Slavic brotherhood,” and the alliance with the East was seen as something unnatural and imposed from the outside. The Czech national tradition was found in the democratic traditions of the First Czechoslovak Republic, one might say even in the Western-type liberal democracy, which provided legitimacy for establishing capitalist economy in the new Czechoslovak state.

<sup>38</sup> Karel Steigerwald, “Devětašedesátníci” in: *Literární noviny*, N. 9, r. 1992, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Michal Kopeček, Miroslav Kunštát, ““Sudetoněmecká otázka” v české akademické debatě po roce 1989” in: *Soudobé dějiny*, N. 10, 2003, p. 293-318.

Another conception of “national democratic traditions” appeared within the historical discourse of the Czech radical left. Advocates of this conception were critical of the one-sided evaluation of the West as the single possible geopolitical option to the Czech future development. In this context, Czech national traditions were not connected exclusively with the Western European development, rather they were sought in the specific Central European space. The idea of the “national road” to socialism and the vision of Central Europe as a historical space, which resists pressures from both East and West and creates an independent alternative, was represented mainly by Sixtyeighters, such as philosophers Karel Kosík and Ivan Sviták or political scientist Zdeněk Mlynář, who saw the reformation of the communist regime and building of democratic socialism during the 1960s as a key event in Czech history. Such a conception was close to Tomáš Garigue Masaryk’s interpretation of Czech history, with its inherent democratic meaning and quest for its own position between East and West.

Tomáš G. Masaryk, first Czechoslovak president and one of the most important political thinkers, became after 1989 in some sense a “universal reference point”.<sup>40</sup> The references to Masaryk we would find across whole political spectrum – from communists to the capitalist, all find in Masaryk’s thought inspiration and its own political legitimacy. In 1991 Ivan Sviták, who returned to Californian exile, wrote:

“The new era of Czechoslovak history enabled me to realize my old life goal which is still ahead. It is democratic socialism... the idea of socialism is today extremely unpopular, but I believe that deep tendency of Czech history will be enforced: it is an attempt to connect socialism with democracy, in which Tomáš Masaryk already believed. Many allude to him today. TGM would expel them with a whip if he would know how they use their legacy.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See Ladislav Holý, *Malý český člověk a skvělý český národ: národní identita a postkomunistická transformace společnosti*, Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Strašné děti”: Rozhovor s Ivanem Svitákem, vedl Alexandr Mitrofanov”, in: *Rudé právo*, 1991. pp. 4-5.

In this statement Svíták manifested something what was characteristic for many socialist thinkers. The fact that the political Right appropriated the legacy of Masaryk (in the form of celebrating ideals of First Czechoslovak Republic's (1918-1938) liberalism in both forms – political and economic.<sup>42</sup>

The political project of the Prague Spring was closely connected with the idea of democratic socialism. If communists after 1989 were finding their democratic traditions in local, national communism, the central feature of collective memory of Prague Spring was the concept of national democracy, or rather specific “Czech” democracy. For Sixtyeighters, the Prague Spring would be unthinkable without something that they called the “Czech democratic tradition”. Following Masaryk’s argumentation they saw in the Czech nation something entirely democratic which opposed any kind of totalitarianism. In their argumentation they opposed the newly widely-shared opinion that Czech nation belongs to the West and tried to revive what the Sixtyeighters stressed was the specificity of Czech democratism. The project of the Prague Spring was interpreted as a “fulfilment” of Masaryk’s and Palacký’s democratic ideals.

Karel Kosík articulated the most significant interpretation and he tried to find philosophical reasons for the Czech political program. He pointed out that a newly emerging democracy represents just the “formal” running of institutions, being a mere mechanism without any “higher idea”. The principle of “higher ideas,” inspired by František Palacký and Tomáš Masaryk, argues that political practice has to be anchored in such questions as: “what is truth, what is man?, what is history?”. Kosík argued that the idea of democratic socialism was not

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<sup>42</sup> See Theodor Syllaba, ed., Zdeněk Klíma, ed. *Masaryk a myšlenka evropské jednoty: konf. s mezin. účastí Praha 13. a 14. června 1991*, Praha: Centrum pro Desk-Top Publishing filozofické fakulty Univerzity Karlovy, 1992.

only a “leftist project”, but that it was closely connected with the national identity and the national historical experience of the Prague Spring.<sup>43</sup>

Most of the former reformist communists had broken up with the Normalized Communist party because of unfavorable conditions – for the protest against the occupation they were either expelled or crossed out. That was one of the reasons why after November 1989 they couldn’t find a common language with the communists, who represented continuity with the Normalization period. There were several exceptions, such as Miloslav Ransdorf, who was in his historical conception very close to Karel Kosík. Ransdorf also tried to find an “alternative communist tradition”, which he found in the Czech modernism movement and mainly in Bohumír Šmeral’s conception of communism, which was rooted in social democratic principles, accounted for the national question and allowed for some kind of an economic plurality.<sup>44</sup>

Many critical voices started to protest against the new politics of memory and history. Within the radical Left, the first to protest were the members of the so-called “generation of ‘68” (“Sixtyeighters”), mainly former reformist communists, who actively participated in the democratization of the Czech communist regime during the 1960s.<sup>45</sup> Their main argument against such historical position was based on the insufficient differentiation between particular periods under the communist government in Czechoslovakia. This argument came up mainly within the discussion about Prague Spring, which, according to them, could not be equated with the previous period of Stalinism and the following twenty years of Normalization. Furthermore, Sixtyeighters refused new legislative acts for their conformity to the principles of collective

<sup>43</sup> Karel, Kosík, *Století Markéty Samsové*, Praha: Český spisovatel, 1991, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf. Světová krize a budoucí Československo. *Haló noviny*, 1993, N. 261, pp. 1, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Rupnik, “Politika vyrovnávání se s komunistickou minulostí: Česká zkušenost” in: *Soudobé dějiny*, N. 2, 2002.

responsibility (such as lustration or legal frames of memory). Leftist criticism tried to point out the unsustainability of the new conception of communist government as a “monolithic period”, given that the mechanisms of power had the same character during the entire 40-year period of communist rule. The historical argumentation of the Sixtyeighters put the emphasis onto different conceptions of post-war history and different role of Czech society within Communist rule. Whereas new politics of memory tended to see the society as a oppressed entity which had no chance to resist, many leftist intellectuals pointed out the importance of society’s participation. Leftist critics of the new official version of history worked on the assumption that the Czechoslovak communist period was not one historical monolith with the same mechanisms of power.

Although in current research this methodological assumption is commonly shared, especially among so called “revisionists” of totalitarian conception of Communism<sup>46</sup> (i.e. focusing on dynamics of communist power and distinguishing between individual periods of communist rule), in the case of the Sixtyeighters we cannot call them simply historical revisionists. Their motivation for such claims was patterned on their generational experience, which alone opposed the totalitarian conception of communist history. This generation’s experience was strongly influenced by the Prague Spring and Czechoslovak liberalization during the 1960s. Throughout the period leading towards Prague Spring, Sixtyeighters had first-hand experience of the dynamics of Czechoslovak communist regime. They refused to see the Prague Spring such as struggle between the two factions within the Communist party; rather they pointed out a huge participation “from below”.

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<sup>46</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Revisionsim in Soviet History” in: *History and Theory*, N. 46, 2007. p. 77 – 91.

## The Act on Illegality of the Communist Regime and on Resistance against It

In the following text I would like to show what function collective memory of the Prague Spring had and how it subverted the dominant historical interpretation of Communist period, as well as how the Prague Spring worked as a political argument. In order to understand this specific political position of the Sixtyeighters after 1989 I will focus on the key political discussions which shaped the early post-communist spectrum: discussions about “The Act on Illegality of the Communist Regime and on Resistance against It.”

The key discussion on the nature of Communist past was triggered after approval of “The Act on Illegality of the Communist Regime and on Resistance against It” frequently called the “anti-communist law”. The act was based on the assertion that the communist regime ruling in Czechoslovakia between 24.2. 1948 and 17.11. 1989 was “criminal, illegitimate and deplorable” and Czechoslovak Communist Party and its members take the responsibility for the communist crimes.<sup>47</sup> The Act was attacked at the end of the year 1991 by group of leftist deputies. However, the Constitutional Court refused their claim.

Many people, especially Sixtyeighters and some of communists started to call for revision of the act. Although the critique was various, in almost all the cases we can identify very specific comparisons. A great majority of Sixtyeighters or former reform communists compared the Act with another document – “The Lesson Drawn from the Crisis Development in the Party and Society” to demonstrate what Karel Kosík called “arrogance of power”.<sup>48</sup> Kosík strictly refused that any legal standard could impose an interpretation of history:

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<sup>47</sup> The Act on Illegality of the Communist Regime and on Resistance Against It, text is achievable online: <http://www.kpv.kozakov.cz/normy/zakon.htm>

<sup>48</sup> Karel Kosík, “Arogance moci“ in: *Předpotopní úvahy*, Praha: Torst, 1997. p. 14.

“The Lesson” prescribed how society should think about its current past and dictated to everyone who wanted to do a career how he or she have to act. The anti-communist act created by today`s winners defines the interpretation of the past through a legal norm. This is unprecedented and extraordinary; maybe only possible in the country of Josef Švejk and Franz Kafka.<sup>49</sup>

Similar to Kosík’s statement, Ivan Sviták argued that the new “Lesson about criminal organization” as he called the Act, was “the stick against the Prague Spring” and ironically added that it is “a stupid anti-communist formula which “outvoted” history as a legislative help for Czech female teachers” in so far as it simplified history.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the euro-communist Jiří Pelikán in 1991 also criticized the effort of the parliament to return a verdict about the history and problematize the interpretation of communist past.

Pelikán, similar to the majority of “68-generation”, reacted naturally most irritatedly to an identification of the Communist regime as one homogenous bloc; rather we can highlight more individual periods with specific characteristics. Not to differentiate would mean to put Stalinism, Prague Spring and Normalization “into one bag”. Such a generalized evaluation of 1968 was, for Pelikán a “historically incorrect interpretation”. Above all the generalization represented an attempt “to liquidate or at least to silence the great and highly-valued intellectual potential of 68-generation, when whole Western world (not only the Left) was envious of us and even today this intellectual potential would be great enrichment of our public and intellectual life.”<sup>51</sup> Pelikán showed that the new official version of history not only covered the “blind spots” silenced or misinterpreted by communist ideology, but at the same time the new politics of history and memory started to produce specific new “blind spots”. These new “blind spots” led to questions of legitimacy about the post-communist political order, together with

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<sup>49</sup> Karel Kosík, “Pražské jaro, konec dějin a šaušpíler“, *Ibid.* 112.

<sup>50</sup> Ivan Sviták, *Ekonomické legendy aneb Tobogan do Bolívie?*, Praha: Borgis, 1991. p. 64.

<sup>51</sup> Jiří Pelikán, “Proč je Pražské jaro nepohodlné?“ in: *Listy*, N. 4, 1991. p. 3.

questions about the “founding myth”, which was based on criticism and rejection of everything that happened between 1948 and 1989.<sup>52</sup>

We can observe a similar demand for defending “different memory” of Czechoslovak communist period. In the reform movement of 1960s Sixtyeighters saw more than a “struggle between two factions” within the Party. Despite their relatively skeptical relation to the possibilities of the Prague Spring program, Sixtyeighters saw in the “unfinished project” of Prague Spring as a highly inspirational source, and at the same time as confirmation of their own political positions. Zdeněk Mlynář refused the assertion about the illegality of the communist period. He argues that

“support of the major part of citizens and thus also legitimacy of former period is in this time provable – albeit not due the proper election, but due the huge people’s participation similar to the period between the November 1989 and June 1990.”<sup>53</sup>

Putting emphasis on people’s support of the democratic reforms during 1960s was also noticeable in Kosík’s work. He was sceptical of the, according to him, “limited” explanation of Prague Spring based on a struggle within the Communist Party and the failure of reform “from above.” Respectively, the idea of reform “from outside”, was for him not so significant as was people’s spontaneous initiative. The people’s initiative was viewed by Kosík as a manifestation of authentic democratic thinking which emerged when Czech people became legally competent and equal political subjects. Kosík saw promise in the massive support “from below” which questioned stereotypical dogmas of political reality.<sup>54</sup> In this vein “the legacy of the Prague Spring” was seen by all the authors – it is not just one finished historical event; rather it is a still-living idea with concrete historical power. Sixtyeighters saw the Prague Spring as a period that challenged Czech historical development – the fact that Brezhnev had recourse to a violent

<sup>52</sup> Jiří Pelikán, “Proč je Pražské jaro nepohodlné?“, *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>53</sup> Zdeněk Mlynář, “S klackem na dějiny“ in: *Proti srsti*, Praha: Persikop, 1996. p. 166.

<sup>54</sup> Karel Kosík, “Pražské jaro, konec dějin a šaušpíler“, *Ibid.* 112.

solution proves the real power of the Prague Spring and its anti-totalitarian nature; its failure does not change its significance.<sup>55</sup>

“The long-term meaning of Prague Spring stems from the fact that it will become an inspirational resource for every democratic movement and its meaning will grow despite the fact we will be critical to its ambivalent aspects. Prague Spring was suppressed; anyway, due to its suppression it gained the value of myth creating the history. The unfinished legacy of 1968 and the unfinished legacy of 1989 are two same challenges of our future.”<sup>56</sup>

What Sviták called an “unfinished legacy of Velvet revolution” became one of the main problems that leftist criticism attacked. Different expectations from the revolution and different conceptions of the term democracy became some of the leading arguments articulated by leftist criticism towards the democratic transformation. The Sixtyeighters’ conception of democracy was based on an idea of general participation – as it was during the Prague Spring. They refused liberal democracy with the representative mechanism when people come to vote every four years; rather the meaning of a “real” democracy was seen in people’s active participation in everyday political decision-making. They argued that only this form of co-creating civil society can ensure avoiding of dogmatism and arrogance of power just as “new division of Europe – this time between rich and poor.”<sup>57</sup>

If all the Sixtyeighters evaluated the Prague Spring predominantly politically, Kosík in contrast, tried to overcome this political understanding and put the Czech 1960s development into a broader philosophical and historical context of modern world crisis. He evaluated the Prague Spring as an act challenging a paradigm of modernity in its both former variants and forms of “normality” – Soviet dogmatic and bureaucratic socialism and Western capitalism. The year

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<sup>55</sup> Jiří Pelikán, “Beseda o exilu“ in: *Listy*, N. 6, 1992. p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ivan, Sviták “Smysl Jara“, in: *Levý Blok: Dialektika voleb*, Praha: SAKKO, 1992. p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Jiří Pelikán “Proč je Pražské jaro nepohodlné“ in: *Listy*, N. 4, 1993. p. 4.

1968 he understood as fully-fledged historical alternative, a completely new system which is neither a “third way” nor half-way attempt that was breaking down due to external intervention:

“In many countries of both the new and old continent the 1968 revolts in the East and West questioned the legitimacy of the ruling historical paradigm and indicated that its creative potential is exhausted and that the upcoming “end of history” requires a completely new paradigm.”<sup>58</sup>

What connected both sides of protests was ideas of alternatives for the former political systems. For Kosík such thinking represented the biggest challenge for post-1989 politics as well. Kosík was disquieted by the post-1989 “illusion of normality” as if no alternative to the new liberal democracy and capitalism could exist.<sup>59</sup> This fundamental challenge of an established order is, according to Kosík, the biggest legacy of Prague Spring. That is the reason why people during the early 1990s should consider Prague Spring as “real historical event”<sup>60</sup>, as a historical legacy which can “open secret possibilities and every epoch can find there impulses to the historical solution of its problems.”<sup>61</sup>

The Anti-communist Act not only condemned the communist period as criminal, it also clearly defined who was responsible for communist crimes. Collective responsibility defined like this, which ascribed the responsibility for committed crimes to the members of Communist party, became a problematic part of post-communist discussions. Zdeněk Mlynář pointed out:

“Functionaries of Communist Party from 1980, born perhaps in 1955, cannot be legally proclaimed fully responsible for the show trial with Milada Horáková or for the invitation of Soviet army in 1968. Generally these dates (born 1953, Party’s career between 1983 and 1989) characterize V. Dlouhý who is today much more popular than Klaus or Havel.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Karel, Kosík, „Pražské jaro, konec dějin a šaušpíler“, *Ibid.* 116.

<sup>59</sup> Karel, Kosík, *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Karel Kosík, Událost (Pražské jaro), in: Poslední eseje, Praha, 2004. p. 67

<sup>61</sup> Karel Kosík, Událost (Pražské jaro), *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>62</sup> Zdeněk Mlynář, „S klackem na dějiny“, *Ibid.* 168.

Mlynář rejected the principle of collective guilt, which is not restricted to the concrete people, crimes or time. He saw main problem in “toothlessness” of the Act, which had no “sanction power” –because nobody could be officially judged, and so he or she cannot officially defend against political slanders. Mlynář appealed to critical analysis of pre-1989 Czechoslovak society, which created “its own way of surviving totalitarianism – with as small conflicts as possible and with passive expectation of change.”<sup>63</sup> He did not agree with the fact that responsibility for national history can be projected only to the small group of people:

“Czech national history is our national history – Habsburg Monarchy, First Republic, Protectorate and also Communism. We have to deal with our history some other way than how anti-communist act proposes.”<sup>64</sup>

Ironically, Mlynář, a former Stalinist, oftentimes made comparisons with the Czechoslovak 1950s. In post-1989 Czechoslovakia he tried to find similarities with Stalinist mechanisms like those which directly excluded one group of people from political decision-making. In the “The Act on Illegality of the Communist Regime and on Resistance against It”, Mlynář saw the effort of one political group to intimidate the others. As during the Stalinism, such an effort would lead to the “monopoly on power striving for total control over everything, which could endanger its dominance.”<sup>65</sup> Reflection on the Stalinist period and its use in post-1989 political discussion is apparent in the rhetoric of many Sixtyeighters, and in some sense, it shaped their political arguments. Many did not understand their participation in the Stalinist repression as something that should disqualify them from the political activities of new democracy; rather they saw their Stalinist participation as an important experience for the creation of democratic institutions. According to Pelikán it was the personal experience of yielding to the temptation of Stalinism, fanaticism and ideological manipulation that gave him the ability to recognize

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 167.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 170

<sup>65</sup> Zdeněk Mlynář, “Lze se poučit z vítězného února?“, *Ibid.* 83.

analogous endeavours in new post-1989 political practices. In 1993 Pelikán who was a former Stalinist and leading person of 1960s showed his ideological change by writing that:

“After their painful experience majority of Sixtyeighters is essentially connected with the nature of democracy, because they realized harmful effects of every fanaticism and dogmatism. To their life credo they adopted ideas of tolerance and dialogue, whereas many of today’s supporters of a “pure democracy” manifest new features of fanaticism and intolerance, which are damaging for democracy.”<sup>66</sup>

### Miloslav Ransdorf and Prague Spring memory within the post-Normalization Communist Party

The specific problem of the Prague Spring memory we can identify within the collective memory of post-1989 members of Communist Party. Czechoslovak Communist Party remained unlike other Central-European Communist parties untransformed and maintained a great majority of its pre-1989 members. Despite the fact the Czech Communist Party applied to democratization after 1989, finally its own power base (members’ base) chose again a path of strict centralization of the Party. After diffident attempts of transformation of the Communist Party to the modern leftist party the “conservative” wing enforced centralist structure of the Party.<sup>67</sup>

However, in the time of overall searching for democratic traditions even Communists with their “totalitarian” past had to open a discussion about their own democratic traditions. On the one hand, the Prague Spring represented probably one of the most serious and famous attempts of democratization of the Czechoslovak Communist system, on the other hand the post-1989 communists were usually people who joined the Party after 1969 and whose political membership and legitimacy were based on the fact they refused the Prague Spring (each

<sup>66</sup> Jiří Pelikán “Proč je Pražské jaro nepohodlné“, *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>67</sup> Michal Kopeček, Stigma minulosti, pouto sounáležitosti. První desetiletí českého polistopadového komunismu, in: Adéla Gjuričová et al., *Ibid.* 352.

aspirant to a membership in normalization Communist Party had to officially refuse the Prague Spring ideals and any attempt to reform a system and declare rightness of the Soviet “brotherly” intervention). Through this perspective it must be clear that among the post-1989 Communists project of democratic socialism did not find a bigger response.<sup>68</sup> At the same time strong personal antipathy existed between former reform communists (Sixtyeighters) and post-1989 Communist. French historian Francoise Mayer described normalization Communists as “young” Communists between whom and those who

“...embodied the Prague Spring reform and after 1968 supported its legacy ruled rather mistrust than alliance; they were divided by too many things – age, experiences, relation to communism. The first (Normalization Communists) considered Sixtyeighters to be Stalinists, because they themselves did not feel a responsibility for the most brutal political repression during 1950s. The second (Sixtyeighters) considered the first to be “opportunists” who benefited from the Party’s membership and who joined the Party just because of the careerism and not because of sincere socialist conviction”<sup>69</sup>

After November 1989, several attempts existed to bring Sixtyeighters and Communists together, especially in the framework of coalition “Leftist Block” (Levý Blok). Nevertheless it was more or less isolated attempts, which has less to do with the real politics of Communist Party. Probably the most serious intellectual attempt to return the Prague Spring tradition back to the Czech Communist political program was made by leading communist intellectual, historian and philosopher, Miloslav Ransdorf. Ransdorf came from a younger generation of normalization elite from Prognostic institute of Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Unlike many normalization communists, he was actively involved in searching for a revision of post-1968 historical interpretation and his engagement caused him problems within the Party during late 1980s. Later he became a member of the “Democartic forum of communists”, a reformist group within the Communist Party which broadly advocated changes in the functioning and program of the Czechoslovak Communist Party after November 1989.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Michal Kopeček, *Ibid.* 355.

<sup>69</sup> Françoise Mayer, *Češi a jejich komunismus: paměť a politická identita*. Praha, 2009. p. 83.

<sup>70</sup> Michal Kopeček, *Ibid.*

His attitude to the Prague Spring he formulated in the introduction of his monumental book *New Reading of Marx*. In the 1968 reform attempt Ransdorf saw historical challenge, which must overcome a subjective meaning of the Prague Spring participants and which offered completely new social possibilities. Ransdorf did not care much about a political success of Sixtyeighters or their attempts to establish new, leftist, political party:

“It does not depend on the political stances of Sixtyeighters after 1989, long time after their zenith. They belong to the past, but the historical challenge of 1968 not. Many remaining Sixtyeighters struggled after 1989 for their personal rehabilitation. But the real rehabilitation could be only the effort to realization of the 1968-political thought in the new historical level.”<sup>71</sup>

Ransdorf here pointed out the fact that almost all Sixtyeighters strived after 1989 especially for their own personal political legitimacy. In this sense it was legitimate objection. As we could see in the previous text the personal engagement of a majority of the Sixtyeighters was lead especially by their own struggle for their own political recognition. This is the reason why they were mostly involved in the legal discussion which could affected their post-1989 political career. Using Prague Spring as an argument they have protected mainly their own personal past and did not offer any elaborated theory how to realized Prague Spring legacy in post-communist Czechoslovakia.

As I showed above the only exception was Karel Kosík who tried to put the Prague Spring into the broader social-political context and came with specific interpretation of Prague Spring as an historical alternative to the modern political systems. Following Kosík’s argument, Ransdorf saw in the Prague Spring a “radical alternative to the system which today threatens a survival of humankind.” Only ideals of Prague Spring could save the people, only from these ideals new paradigm could be born.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf, *Nové čtení Marxe*, Praha: Futura, 1996. p. 9

<sup>72</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf, *Ibid.*

As a historian and philosopher, Ransdorf was aware of the need of a proper philosophical method which would answer to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century problems. He appealed to overcoming prejudice against Marxist theory and getting rid of a “Marxist caricature of thought” as it was reproduced during the normalization in the form of vulgar Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>73</sup> These attempts were characteristic of the 1990s distaste for anything related to Marxism. Marxism was seen as ideology rather than proper philosophical methodology. This statement remained for very long time supportive of the fact that teaching of Marxism disappeared from high school education completely.<sup>74</sup>

With his attempt to incorporate a Prague Spring legacy to the Communist program Miloslav Ransdorf represented among Communists, or rather members of Czechoslovak Communist Party, a unique attitude. The “Olomouc program” of the Communist Party from 1992 declared the restitution of democratic tradition; nevertheless in public and medial discourse Communist Party was not able to get rid of its “totalitarian” legacy. Yet Prague Spring was perceived among the members of the Communist Party still negatively or with hesitation. Even people who were trying to stress this communist tradition were aware of the problematic relation to this historical period. A different tradition must be emphasized, which was finally found in the political thought of Austro-Marxist and founder of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Bohumír Šmeral.

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<sup>73</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf, *Ibid.* 10

<sup>74</sup> See for example Czech documentary „Léčba Klausem“ created by Igor Chaun, 1993.

## In search of democratic traditions of Czech post-1989 communism: Bohumír Šmeral and national road to socialism

„Never more any extremism; never more any rule of phrases and simple universal solutions. This is our program. Our program of spreading of democracy. The program of those who learned a lesson from our history.”<sup>75</sup>

Miloslav Ransdorf, 1993

As I showed in the previous chapter, the most significant democratic tradition of Czech communism – the Prague Spring tradition – did not and probably could not strongly resonate within the post-1989 Communist Party. In the process of searching for the democratic legacy of Czech communism and Marxist socialism after 1989, the Prague Spring represented probably the strongest “democratic moment” in the history of Czech communism. Despite this fact, for the “old-new” (re-established) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (CPBM) it was highly problematic to refer to ideals of democratic socialism and to try to resuscitate “Prague Spring spirit.” The reason for this problematic relationship to the Prague Spring I explained in the last chapter. In this chapter I would like to introduce another democratic tradition which was openly proclaimed by some of Czech Communist intellectuals: the intellectual legacy of Bohumír Šmeral’s political thought.

Unlike the rest of the Central-European communist parties, the Czech Communist Party did not radically transform itself, remaining the most visible relict of “ancien regime” on the Czech political scene. After 1989, several attempts existed to reform the Party to the more “modern” and Western model, but all these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful and broad post-Normalization membership chose the path of centralization.

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<sup>75</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf, “Světová krize a budoucí Československo” in: *Haló noviny*, N. 261, 1993. p 5.

Shortly after November 1989, the Communist Party officially apologized to the “citizens of Czechoslovakia” for its committed injustice, repression, suppression of personal freedom, mistakes and errors and crimes against humanity. However, Czech Communists did not chose the “transformation path” and bet on continuity, maintaining the still numerous members of the Party which means they preserved a large part of its “totalitarian” features. After the extinction of the federal Czechoslovak Party, the successor-party “Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia” was created. On one hand, this Party adopted the former Party’s agenda, members and property, on the other hand after federalization they took advantage of calling themselves “transformed”.<sup>76</sup>

However, in this time of recalling democratic tradition the Communist Party had to revise its own old interpretation of Czech Communism. During Normalization (1969 – 1989), a strict interpretation of Czech communist traditions was produced that affirmed the necessity of Bolshevisation of the Party in 1929, takeover of power in February 1948, or intervention of Soviet army intervention in 1968. The tradition of the Prague Spring and intellectual legacies of such persons as Bohumír Šmeral, Karel Teige or Závěš Kalandra were generally seen as “bourgeois deviations” or at least political failure. There were no attempts to incorporate their ideas to the official political program.

Bohumír Šmeral was always a “problematic” personality for the Czech communists. He was an Austro-Marxist who, in the spirit of Otto Bauer’s conception of nation, consistently emphasized the right to cultural self-determination of nations. His idea of socialism was entirely internationalist in the sense of the Austromarxist theory of a nation. Following many Marxist revisionists and socialist politicians of the time, Šmeral understood the seriousness of the

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<sup>76</sup> Michal Kopeček, *Stigma minulosti, pouto sounáležitosti. První desetiletí českého polistopadového komunismu*, in: Adéla Gjuričová et al., *Ibid.* 350.

national question, which was for him not only “bourgeois problem,” but a real social problem. Seen from an Austro-Marxist perspective, he believed that socialism should not cancel only class struggle, but national equality should also be established.

After the First World War and declaration of Czechoslovakian independence in 1918, Šmeral abandoned politics for a while. Because he had advocated the need for preserving Habsburg Monarchy after the establishment of new Czechoslovak state during the war, he was generally seen as a traitor of the Czech nation. Nevertheless he consistently worked in the left-wing of Social democratic Party and, after the establishing of the Communist Party in 1921, Šmeral reappeared in “high politics” and became one of the most prominent communist politicians of the time.

His politics were focused on the creation of a mass communist Party, which would respect national specificity of each region. For such a political opinion he was marginalized by the Bolshevik’s clique (the so called “Karlín Boys”) within the Communist Party. Unlike this clique he did not systematically speak against the Czechoslovak state and respected parliamentary democracy, refusing Stalinism and any subordination to Moscow. Instead he believed politics should reflect national and regional specificities.

What or who is in Šmeral’s political thought the nation? Šmeral did not offer such a theoretically coherent conception of the nation as his Austrian colleague Otto Bauer. At this point we have to consider Quentin Skinner’s conception of *speech acts* and the idea that the meaning of a given speech can be derived from the speaker’s intention.<sup>77</sup> Šmeral was firstly a politician, not a philosopher. In this sense it would be useless to “judge” his using of political

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<sup>77</sup> Iain Hampsher-Monk, “Speech Acts, Languages or Conceptual History?” in: *History of concepts: comparative perspectives*, edited by Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, Amsterdam, 1998. p. 42 -45.

concepts only on the basis of its analytical coherence. His main aim was to achieve socialism and convince as many people as possible that socialism was the best answer.

In his attempts to prove that socialism was the final aim he, probably intentionally, reproduced some of the “rhetorical strategies” of Czech 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, which essentially argued that the nation is not just a small group of people but actually the entire community – the people. Šmeral claimed: “Not just a small minority of wealthy men, but...all the people are the nation.” From such a perspective, the Social Democratic Party and later the Communist Party, which defends the interests of all people, “is in fact the most national and most patriotic party.”<sup>78</sup> He therefore saw the Czech bourgeoisie as “anti-national” because they exploited the Czech people<sup>79</sup> and supported his critique by alluding to Karel Havlíček as an example of “Czechness:” “The nation is not government, even aristocracy, even hierarchy, even church, even peasants, even crofters, but rather the whole of all these groups, in which each group is useful as long as it does not oppress and bother the other group.”<sup>80</sup>

Šmeral’s conception offered an alternative to the, according to him, “bourgeois” conception promoted by Tomáš G. Masaryk, and respectively, František Palacký. Šmeral promoted his vision by using less theoretical and more “local” arguments - examples from Czech history- to convince the Czech public. Considering the classical Czech narrative, which was based on the entire Czech-Germans struggle, Šmeral put the most important historical “symbolic centers” of Czech historical narrative (such as Hussite period or the National Awakening) and tried to reinterpret them in a way that would be in agreement with his vision of internationalism and national tolerance. Šmeral appealed to the national icon Jan Hus to provide arguments

<sup>78</sup> Bohumír Šmeral, Kdo jsou a co chtějí sociální demokraté, in: Jan, Galandauer, *Šmeral: Bohumír Šmeral 1880-1914*, Praha, 1981. p. 96

<sup>79</sup> Bohumír Šmeral, *Ibid.* 100.

<sup>80</sup> Bohumír Šmeral, *Ibid.* 97.

supporting pro-internationalism and national tolerance – “Like Jan Hus, in the middle of national fanaticism, we do not hesitate to confess (declare) that good German is for us better than bad Czech.”<sup>81</sup> As such we can see that Jan Hus as well as Karel Havlíček represented opposition to the “classical” narrative of Czech-German conflicting community; Jan Hus is seen as advocate of the Germans, and Karel Havlíček defends the people’s interests against the rich bourgeoisie as the Social Democracy did.

Šmeral’s democratism, his conception of nation and communism, which should be anchored in the social-democratic tradition of the Second International and should be more respectful to the specific national conditions and Central-European reality, caused Šmeral to start to be considered increasingly dangerous for the Stalinist Communist Party; finally he was pushed away to Mongolia where he helped to build a local Communist Party. After 1948, Bohumír Šmeral’s conception was generally interpreted as a “bourgeois deviation” and reformist tradition; Šmeral was seen as the man who was ready to support a “corrupt” parliamentary democracy and who refused Stalin’s course.

Czech communist democratic traditions were revised during the Prague Spring. Promoters of national democratic socialism, which should represent an alternative to both Soviet dogmatic socialism and Western capitalism, were trying to revive forgotten “positive” chapters from the history of Czech communism. Especially these concepts and persons, who in the past stressed the specificity of Czech communism and refused to subordinate themselves to the dictum of Moscow and the Third (Communist) International, were promoted. The political thought of Bohumír Šmeral offered such interpretations that enabled the Prague Springers to see Šmeral’s democratism as a national project. Šmeral’s sensitivity for the national question and Central-

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<sup>81</sup> Bohumír Šmeral, *Ibid.* 98.

European specificity, and his disagreement with Stalin's political course, represented exactly what the Prague Spring program needed. The Stalinist interpretation reproached Šmeral and Austro-Marxism for "bourgeois deviation," yet Šmeral's more complex goal was to preserve the parliamentary system and refused radical revolutionary solutions and did not follow the strict centralized and dogmatic course of the Comintern. Prague Spring elites revised him in the best "Prague Springue spirit" – Šmeral represented the democratic, non-radical tradition of Czech communism which was not imposed "from outside", but it was an entirely domestic conception. If Stalinists saw Šmeral as a "negative deviation," during the Prague Spring (as with many others national traditions) he was seen as an opposite, as a "positive deviation" for underlining Czech national uniqueness; as a man who was able to create a strong communist party (at the beginning of 1920s the Czechoslovak Communist Party was the most numerous in the Comintern) without succumbing to Soviet radicalism.

During the sixties, the most serious attempt to bring Šmeral to the fore and reinterpret Czech contemporary history was made by reform communist historian Zdeněk Kárník in his book *Masaryk, Habsburk či Šmeral* (Masaryk, Habsburg or Šmeral). By focusing on both Czech and Austrian-German socialist movement, Kárník showed a national problem as the key problem causing contradictory attitudes of both movements and thus he subverted Stalinist, consistently "class-oriented" analysis.<sup>82</sup>

Similar to the sixties, shortly after the Velvet Revolution in November 1989, in 16.12.1989 communist historian Jan Galandauer appealed to his readers to follow Šmeral's conception of socialism and his democratic "national road" towards communism, or rather "socialism." During the first week of the Velvet Revolution, it was not clear that the Communist would lose

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<sup>82</sup> Zdeněk Kárník, *Socialisté na rozcestí: Habsburk, Masaryk či Šmeral?*, Praha: Svoboda, 1968.

their power absolutely. People still believed the Party could keep a leading position or at least some form of the communist system would be preserved.<sup>83</sup> In this sense Galandauer called for an ideological overturn of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. As means for “rectification” he chose the political conceptions of Bohumír Šmeral. Galandauer especially appreciated Šmeral’s strong belief about the European character of the Czech, particularly Czechoslovak, question. He put Šmeral on par with Palacký and Masaryk, who believed that Czech historical development is entirely connected with the overall European historical process. In this sense Galandauer declared Šmeral to be the only communist politician who was able to seriously contribute to the discussion on the “Czech question”.

Through Šmeral’s example and his political thinking about nation Galandauer started slightly to change a communist interpretation of Czech communism. By refusing Stalinism as something imposed onto the Czech nation, he stressed the national, domestic tradition of Communism. Galandauer connected Šmeral’s traditions with the reform movement of 1960s. In this time, the specificity of Czech communism, which was rooted in social-democratic tradition, not in radical revolutionarism, reappeared and Czech “innate” democratism came out again. In the Czechoslovak 1960s’ reformist movement Galandauer saw the same political position as Šmeral proclaimed – democratic socialism respecting a parliamentary democracy. This was also the way for the future of post-1989 Czech communism. To appropriate democratism of the communist political program and to respect a variety of socialist conceptions within Czech communism. Finally in December 1989, Galandauer called for following Šmeral’s tradition and restructuring the Czechoslovak Party: “In order to overcome

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<sup>83</sup> See Jiří Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce: aktéři, zápletky a křižovatky jedné politické krize: (od listopadu 1989 do června 1990)*, Praha: Prostor, 2003.

our current crisis we need a new image of the history of proletarian movement. The personality of Bohumír Šmeral sketches the direction.”<sup>84</sup>

### Miloslav Ransdorf and Šmeral's legacy

Probably one of the most serious intellectual attempts to return Šmeral's tradition back to the communist political program was made by Miloslav Ransdorf. Using the Prague Spring as an example to subvert the dominant post-1989 historical narrative, he stressed especially the impossibility of the “homogenous” explanation of Czech communism. By using Šmeral's example, Ransdorf presented a no less serious objection.

The dominant, mostly anti-communist, narrative repeatedly stressed the fact that the idea of communism is something that was imposed on the Czech nation, something that came from “outside” and that oppressed Czech natural democracy. Unlike this post-1989 dominant opinion, Ransdorf showed that Czech political development has its own “national” communist tradition and the communist idea is not an extraneous feature of the Czech political environment.

Ransdorf not only stressed Šmeral's thought but he even came back to the “rebellion” generation of radical anarchists, such as Josef Svatopluk Machar, Stanislav Kostka Neumann, or the radical mystic Otakar Březina. Ransdorf claimed that not only the reformist, social-democratic tradition of communism but also the legacy of more radical ideas belongs to the annals of Czech history.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Jan Galandauer, “Šmeral a naše nynější krize”, in: *Rudé právo*, 16. 12. 1989. p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf “Šmeral a naše nynější orientace” online:

[http://www.sds.cz/docs/prectete/epubl/mr\\_sanno.htm](http://www.sds.cz/docs/prectete/epubl/mr_sanno.htm)

Nevertheless finally even Ransdorf chose Šmeral as a prominent democratic tradition which must be followed after 1989. Following radical understanding of the term democracy, Ransdorf argued that Šmeral's thought offers a possibility of overcoming the limits of political democracy towards the socialist democratic project.

Similar to Galandauer Ransdorf spoke about "Šmeral's democratic spirit" which returned three times during the Czech 20<sup>th</sup> century history: in the 1930s, when the Communist Party carried out a politics of people's front against fascism; during the Second World War (Šmeral elaborated a conception of national and democratic revolution); and finally during the 1960s and Prague Spring.<sup>86</sup> Ransdorf advocated returning to Šmeral's idea of the communist Party. The Communist Party should connect the Czech road to socialism with the formation of a new life style where a variety of leftist alternatives will have the same weight.

Under this plurality of leftist socialist conceptions also the idea of economic plurality was incorporated. Such thinking was necessary for the Communist Party which for a very long time proclaimed economic centralism and excluded the plurality of ownership. Šmeral's legacy offered a conception which included economic plurality; he thought the structure of the new economy should include also features of market economy and his conception did not exclude even new forms of "romantic" anti-capitalism.<sup>87</sup>

Ransdorf appealed to the plurality of leftist conceptions. By referring to the Bolshevisation of the Communist Party in 1920s he implicitly compared Normalization with the Stalinists:

"Even today there are people who want us to be in such a position of sectarian exclusivity, as preachers of some "principle of purity". We can never accept this principle. We have an understanding of a variety of leftist positions. Heritage of both

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

prejudices and sectarianism must be overcome, be it on the side of Social democrats or within our Party.”<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore he showed something what was characteristic of understandings of Czech communism after 1989: Czech communism is in fact radical democratic socialism. In this sense Šmeral and origins of Communist party were highly important legacies which affirmed the social democratic character of Czech communism:

“Evan Šmeral saw a communist as a social democrat who does not question final aims of Marxist socialism. Communism and social-democratism are two forms of the same movement; two methods which has the same legitimacy.”<sup>89</sup>

According to Ransdorf, the Communist Party should stress its own domestic sources of communist identity and its own national power:

“Here we can follow Šmeral who enforced independent politics towards Moscow and connected a future of Czech socialism with progressive changes in Europe or at least in Central Europe”<sup>90</sup>

By underlining Šmeral’s historical importance, Ransdorf subverted the dominant historical narrative and offered a different interpretation of the Czech interwar development. Similar to Galandauer, Ransdorf also put Šmeral on par with Palacký and Masaryk. To Ransdorf, Palacký and Masaryk were politicians who still reproduced the bourgeois conception of the nation and who did not stress socialism as a final aim. Thus to him Masaryk’s national revolution lacked a real social program.

Šmeral’s importance was based on overcoming such conceptions and offering an ideal of “real” democracy which should be rooted in socialist ideals. In this sense Šmeral was, according to Ransdorf, the only democratic politician who refused the Versailles “democratic” ideals and wanted to achieve more radical democracy. If Ransdorf saw Masaryk’s “revolution” as

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

unfinished, in Šmeral he saw the politician who had a potential to “finish” the national revolution by adding a program of social equality. In the spirit of such a challenge, the Communist Party was established and its legacy must also be re-appropriated after 1989. The main problem Ransdorf saw in the insufficiency of new democracy, which proclaimed especially political plurality. Only a democracy that strives to achieve political plurality and overcome social inequalities can be successful. According to Ransdorf, post-1989 democracy offered only the former; Stalinist democracy offered only the latter. Once again, only Šmeral had offered the solution. Ransdorf pointed out Šmeral was able to connect respect to political plurality, social differences, and national specificity:

“Masaryk’s student Beneš became close to Šmeral’s conception when he realized that political democracy is not enough: his conception of socialistic democracy was born in London exile, like in Moscow Bohumír Šmeral created conception of national-democratic revolution. Despite many differences, both had significant common features: respect to the Czech historical tradition and national specificity was built on the open society and united Europe. The narrow framework of political democracy was overcome by invasion of socialization. But the Cold War destroyed both Beneš’s vision and original ideas of Czechoslovak communism.”<sup>91</sup>

Ransdorf’s interpretation of Czech modern history came from the assumption that national communism was ready to realize democratic ideals. Nevertheless “Yalta and Potsdam,” in other words, the start of the Cold war, foiled the Czech socialist-democratic project, which according to Ransdorf, built socialism on the grounds of civic society. Using the term “civic society” Ransdorf follows one of the most popular concept from the time of the Velvet Revolution and the early nineties. Civic society was generally seen as something which was for very long time oppressed and opposed to any communist system. Ransdorf pointed out that even civic society is part of the program of national democratic communism; unfortunately this program was foiled by international conditions of the Cold War and an imposition of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia after 1948:

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<sup>91</sup> Miloslav Ransdorf, “Světová krize a budoucí Československo” in: *Haló noviny*, N. 251, 1993. p. 1.

“New Czechoslovakia was integrated into the Soviet Block where no sympathy for a need to build socialism on the development of structures of civic society. Such conception was stressed in the election program form 1946.”<sup>92</sup>

According to Ransdorf Stalinism fulfilled the social claims of real democracy. Nevertheless, at the level of a civic society it failed. This mistake must be corrected after 1989. Communist democracy must overcome both the “totalitarian” legacy of Stalinism and the new “socially-insufficient” democracy. Ransdorf wanted to overcome “procedural and formal democracy”<sup>93</sup> and called for “democracy of everyday life”<sup>94</sup> based on information, cultural and economic democracy.<sup>95</sup>

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Bohumír Šmeral’s political thought represented a suitable tool to democratize the Communist Party. However Šmeral’s conception was advocated only among a few communist intellectuals and it appeared as a Part of Olomouc Communist Program, which means it had little to do with real communist post-1989 politics. Thus it seems Šmeral’s conception was used mainly pragmatically as legitimization. The membership of the Communist Party refused any reform efforts and affirmed the Normalization structure of Party. Because of the high number of members who stayed in the Party after 1989, most of post-communist communist leaders intuited that to stay “unreformed” and follow many of the normalization ideas would guarantee relatively stable electoral base.

Communist politics during the 1990s were mainly anti-German, national-chauvinistic. In this case Šmeral’s legacy had no impact on the practical politics and remained only as a rhetorical “shield” of communist Party which desperately needed any kind of democratic traditions; on

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

the other hand it was not able and probably not willing to fulfil Šmeral's legacy, which would mean to really reconstruct the Party structure and change national-chauvinistic politics. Even Miloslav Ransdorf, probably the only significant communist intellectual at the time, showed a noticeable contradiction between what he rhetorically proclaimed and what was his practical policy, which absolutely against the "spirit" of the deeply national-tolerant Šmeral.

Bohumír Šmeral and his communist tradition was in no case the main topic of post-1989 historical discussion. However, even this marginal discussion showed the limits of the dominant anti-communist historical discourse. By using "Šmeral's tradition" as an historical argument, the next serious objection has appeared. The fact that communism was not "imposed" onto Czechoslovakia, that there is specific national tradition, however different from Stalinism, must be taken seriously. Šmeral's discussion" not only did not affect wide public opinion, but also did not speak to the Czech post-1989 communists. Although highly intellectually interesting and inspiring, until these days Šmeral's legacy remained merely an interest of several intellectuals or historians.

## Discourse on history within the Czech Radical Left

In November 1989 they sang about the “rule that has come back to the people”. Today we must listen to these people who yesterday protected human rights and democracy, and their statements that citizens are not supposed to speak against the politicians’ decisions. Actually, it is our fault. The hate for “real existing socialism” and illusions of “western democracy” resulted in people disappearing from the streets and yielding power to people with new ambitions who quickly reverted to old power practices. It belongs to the our tradition to count on various “Saint Wenceslases”<sup>96</sup>

Jakub Polák, 1992

The legacy of the Prague Spring and Bohumír Šmeral’s political thought represented two main reference points which part of the Czech Left used to formulate their political ideas. Both of these traditions characteristically abandoned the term revolution, applied the reformist strategy of the Socialist International, and stressed the national specificity of the Czech socialism.<sup>97</sup> The term “revolution” disappeared from the communist vocabulary soon after the end of Stalinism, and few people used this term seriously as a concept in political programs. During 1989, the radical leftist idea of radical social revolution did not find a wider response in a still normalized society where “workers had higher salaries than medical doctors”. On the contrary, people started to call for new plurality and also for a renewal of social differentiation.

The “capitalist revolution” or “unfinished revolution,” or “Velvet revolution” as it was called within the Czech radical Left, was for the radicals. During 1989 they called for political revolution, not radical economic change. Unlike Sixtyeighters and “post-communist communists”, they never became a part of any establishment and brought forth strong social

<sup>96</sup> Jakub Polák, “Akční plán hnutí” in: *A – kontra*, N. 18-19, 1992. p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> See for example Ivan Sviták, *Sametová normalizace: výroční zpráva o České republice za rok 1993*, Praha SAKKO, 1994; see Jiří Pelikán „Jakým směrem?“ in: *Listy* N. 1, 1993, p. 5; see Zdeněk Mlynář „Levý blok není KSČM“ in: *Proti srsti*, Praha: Persikop, 1996. p. 180.

criticism both before and after 1989, which lead to the permanent social isolation of all radical-leftist streams.<sup>98</sup>

However minor the Radical left within the Czech political scene was, it did not appear as a result of 1989 changes. A segment of the student movement emerged within the Czech political scene during the end of 1960s appealing to a radical-leftist tradition. These people, from whom the most significant person was certainly Petr Uhl, were inspired by the ideas of the New Left, but also they appealed to the 4<sup>th</sup> (Trotskyist) International. They were reading and translating authors such Milovan Djilas, Jacek Kuroń, Daniel Cohn-Bendit or Herbert Marcuse.<sup>99</sup> The key event for the spreading of New Left ideas to Czechoslovakia was an international seminar on the “revival process” during the spring of 1969. The main issue discussed at the seminar was the idea of self-organization of the proletariat. Although several attempts were done from the side of intellectuals toward the workers, finally this idea did not find any wider response among the Czech workers.<sup>100</sup>

After the Soviet intervention, the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) was established where radically thinking students discussed political issues. After a short existence, the RMY was discovered and some of its members were sent to prison for several years.<sup>101</sup>

Later, a part of the former RYM started to work within the dissidence movement and became a significant political force. Petr Uhl and Jaroslav Suk, for example, formulated the “Program of social self-government”, which probably represented the only coherent proposal for an alternative social organization ever provided by leftist opposition.<sup>102</sup> The radical leftist part of

<sup>98</sup> Martin Bastl, *Radikální levice v České republice: devadesátá léta dvacátého století*, Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, Mezinárodní politologický ústav, 2001.

<sup>99</sup> Petr Uhl, Zdenko Pavelka, *Dělal jsem, co jsem považoval za správné*, Praha: Torst, 2013. pp. 117, 350.

<sup>100</sup> See for example Ivan Sviták, *Kulatý čtverec: dialektika demokratizace: úvahy a statě, články z let 1968-1969*, Praha: Naše vojsko, 1990.

<sup>101</sup> See Jaroslav Pažout, *Mocným navzdory: Studentské hnutí v šedesátých letech 20. století*, Praha: Prostor, 2008.

<sup>102</sup> Petr Uhl et al. *Program společenské samosprávy*. Köln, Index, 1982.

the dissidence movement appropriated the language of human rights, a key characteristic of dissent. Nevertheless, they never accepted another key feature of dissent –non-political politics/anti-politics – and continuously spoke against such an attitude.<sup>103</sup>

With regard to the still rising anarchist movement during the late 1980s, in November 1989 the group Leftist Alternative was established. LA represented the official intellectual platform of the Radical Left and a united intellectual group composed of Czech Trotskyists, anarchists and radical Marxists. In its programmatic thesis, Leftist Alternative called for pluralistic socialism and economic and self-governed democracy. They distanced themselves from the Normalization political praxis which they labelled as non-democratic and non-socialist: “This political and economic system, if we call it Stalinism, neo-Stalinism or real existing socialism did not prove its ability and thus it is necessary to overcome it.”<sup>104</sup>.

### Radical Left and the Communist Past

Radical leftists were not as affected by the overall coming to terms with communist history as many other leftist subjects were. The intellectual streams belonging to these traditions such as anarchism, Trotskyism or the New Left never became a part of an official communist program, even during the 1960s. Nevertheless, after 1989 these intellectual traditions also had to face the same problem as any other leftist subject – the discrediting of leftist political language.

The problem of the communist past and its reinterpretation was not a key issue within the Radical Left that would help them to achieve their political program. Similar to the

<sup>103</sup> Petr Uhl, “Demokracii pro některé: Kritika manifestu Hnutí za Občanskou svobodu” in: *Imprekor (Revue IV. Internacionály)*, 1988.

<sup>104</sup> Programmatic thesis of LA, in: *Imprekor (Revue IV. Internacionály)*, 1989. p. 10.

Sixtyeighters, they refused the generalization of the communist past, especially when it could create any social injustices (for example lustration law) or if the abandoning of communist past served just for instrumental achieving of power. Otherwise a discussion about the nature of the communist past did not become a primary topic within the Radical Left in part due to the quite young average age of many of its members who did not have to achieve their political legitimacy through the articulation of a specific evaluation of the communist period.

Especially anarchists called for radical change of the system, such as philosopher Karel Kosík. However minor, during the early 1990s they became the strictest critiques of the “new regime” and new establishment. While refusing the old communist regime, as it was considered immoral, they also asked about the morality of the new post-1989 liberal democracy.<sup>105</sup> Anarchists pointed out that the nature of system did not change, it remained repressive and socially unjust. According to them old bureaucracy had just transformed itself into a new capitalist elite, a “new bourgeoisie”. As the primary program of the Czech anarchists was the abolishment of social injustices, they did not believe in the new system with its forthcoming capitalist reform. Capitalist system did not abolish the social inequalities, it just pushed them into the other social areas.<sup>106</sup>

This statement which refused any mechanism producing social inequalities was close to Kosík’s civilization critique by equalling both systems as a product of one perverted modern civilization. As I showed in the chapter about Prague Spring memory, Kosík was the only Sixtyeighter who, through reference, to the Prague Spring provided broader philosophical criticism. In his essay *Infernální kruhy* from the year 1993, he compared the communist system with the new capitalist one. According to Kosík both systems are characteristic by existence of

<sup>105</sup> VLK (without title), in: *A- kontra*, N. 6, 1991. p. 11.

<sup>106</sup> Vratislav Votava, “Desatero pro radikální levici” in: *A – kontra*, N. 10 -13, 1992. p. 6.

one “highest” authority. The highest authority within Communism was the Communist *Party*, which displayed absolute power over people’s life. After the collapse of communism, the *Party* was replaced by the *Market*, which Kosík saw as the “highest reality”:

“Similar to the Party in the past, the Market claimed today a monopoly social position which refused anything different: everything that is non-market, independent, noble, poetic – sooner or later will be swallowed and absorbed into Market’s mechanism.”<sup>107</sup>

Positive change could, according to Kosík, come only with the rejection of modern paradigm and developing entirely new political system. This relatively abstract argumentation resonated among the anarchists who, later in 1990s with forthcoming globalization, became strongly inspired by Kosík’s critique of global capitalism.<sup>108</sup> Similar to Kosík they called for social liberalization that will cancel social hierarchies.<sup>109</sup> However anarchist civilization critique was closed to Kosík’s position, so important differences must be highlighted. Kosík’s alternative relied on the strong national inspirations. He believed that Czech national development proved the essential democratic nature of Czech nation and therefore the radical step towards a new system can be done only in the national framework by reviving Czech democratic potential. Such a nationalist conception of a future political program was strongly refused by the Radical Left. In the overall criticism they stood close to Kosík, but without stressing national legacy, without Prague Spring nostalgia and distaste to the new social (“post-materialistic”) movement.

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<sup>107</sup> Karel Kosík, “Inferální kruhy” in: *Předpotopní úvahy*, Praha: Torst, 1997. p. 129.

<sup>108</sup> Karel Kosík, “Lumpenburžoazie a vyšší duchovní pravda”, *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> VLK (without title), in: *A-Kontra*, N. 6, 1991. p. 11.

## “National legacy” within the Czech Radical Left

The Czech Radical Left refused nationalism and any political program which would establish one nation as the bearer of certain exclusivity. On the contrary, during the late 1980s leftist anarchists were the first to start pointing out questions of forthcoming racism as a serious problem. Thus, the radical left environment was sensitive to any manifestation of nationalism. Even during the late 1980s, Trotskyist dissident Petr Uhl criticized the rest of the dissent for the national references in their political programs. Uhl accused other dissidents of not being able to overcome the national positions from which they evaluated social problems. For example, according to Uhl, other dissidents would never concede the non-existence of the Czechoslovak state and did not discuss possible forms of international connections pertaining to leftist political power.<sup>110</sup>

Despite this fact, we find national references within the Czech radical Left as well, but a quality of being Czech was not articulated; rather they were searching for intellectual potential of overcrossing the national framework of Czech political thought. Several attempts to systematically explain the legacy of Czech anarchists can be found in the anarchist revue A-Kontra, a DIY magazine which started to be published in 1991. The contributors to A-Kontra varied in status from “established” figures like Petr Uhl to young teenagers with no political experience.

More than merely referencing Czech anarchist or the Czech radical leftist traditions, it is above all important to note that references to the international radical left were made. A general history of anarchism was preferred, and the authors consider most important for introducing the

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<sup>110</sup> Srv. UHL, Petr, Na okraj programových tezí Obroda, in: *Imprekor* (Revue IV. Internacionály), Praha, September 1989, Praha, s. 33-61, srv. Uhl, Petr, Demokracii pro některé: Kritika manifestu Hnutí za Občanskou svobodu, in: *Imprekor* (Revue IV. Internacionály), Praha, December 1988.

political thought of significant anarchists were figures such as Michail Bakunin or Peter Kropotkin.<sup>111</sup> In general early Czech anarchists were shown as the people who fought against social democracy, militarism, and clericalism; this was seen as the early intellectual legacy which was still of relevance.<sup>112</sup>

Within the anarchist movement no significant interpretations of modern Czech history or of Czech communism appeared. If we can single out one significant work, it would probably be Václav Tomek's book "Ideology of Czech anarchism" which appeared at the end of the 1980s.<sup>113</sup> This book became a reference point for the Czech radical left after 1989, even though nothing else in this time was written about the history of Czech anarchism. Despite the highly descriptive nature of the book, Funk adopted its interpretation about the "uniqueness" of Czech anarchism in its social-democratic roots and common origins within the social democratic movement.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, in comparison to ideas of "national road" or national specificity as occurred in the case of the Prague Spring tradition or Bohumír Šmeral's legacy, anarchists did not stress the social democratic nature of Czech anarchism (generally we can say typical "social-democratism" of the Czech Left) as something positive<sup>115</sup>. On the contrary, social-democratic features were seen as something highly unwanted.

Next huge tradition which could be potentially revived within the Radical Left after 1989 was a huge legacy of the Czech avant-gardist thinking; especially of surrealism. Nevertheless, after 1989 an attempt to rescue Czech surrealism did not occupy a significant political position. Before the Second World War, Czech surrealism represented a significant part of an extremely

<sup>111</sup> Andrej Funk, "Život a dílo Petra Kropotkina", *A-Kontra*, N. 16, 1991. p. 43; Marcel Lýsek, "Michail Alexandrovič Bakunin", in *A-kontra*, N. 12, 1992. p. 29.

<sup>112</sup> Andrej Funk, "Z historie českého anarchismu" in: *A-Kontra*, N. 9, 1992. p.21.

<sup>113</sup> Václav Tomek, *Ideologie českého anarchismu*, Praha: Academia, 1988.

<sup>114</sup> Andrej Funk, "Z historie českého anarchismu", *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> See for example Jacques Rupnik, *Dějiny Komunistické strany Československa: od počátků do převzetí moci*, Praha: Academia, 2002.

developed Czech Avant-Garde. Although we cannot in general declare the Avant-Garde to be “leftist”, the interwar Czechoslovak Avant-Garde (and a great part of its cultural production) was predominantly leftist.<sup>116</sup> Many of its thinkers belonged to the radical left, calling for radical change and social revolution.

Open minded yet socially radical opinions were shared during the 1930s among the Czech Avant-garde, especially among surrealists. Two major theoreticians appeared among the surrealists: Karel Teige and Závěš Kalandra. Teige’s main concern was the defence of artists’ freedom, and he therefore criticized nascent Stalinism and rejected national artistic frameworks. His colleague, the historian and journalist Závěš Kalandra, was focused on the reinterpretation of Czech history and referred to the thinking of Michail Bakunin in his analysis of Karel Hynek Mácha and František Palacký.<sup>117</sup> It was indeed Kalandra who established a tradition of Czech radical, non-Stalinist and non-dogmatic Left. Although he was later sentenced for being a Trotskyist, he never applied to Trotskyists. As the Czech political scientist Ondřej Slačálek points out:

“People belonging to the part of the Marxist Left which was in the conflict with the Czechoslovak Communist Party and later with whole communist regime could not ignore the problem of authority because their work and finally their everyday experience was affected by an authoritative rule of society. And finally, despite the fact that they themselves applied to some authoritative ideologies such as Trotskyism or Maoism, in political praxis they considered this a fight for freedom.”<sup>118</sup>

After second world war the situation became very unfavourable for Czech surrealism (not only in Czechoslovakia, but for example in France as well). Communist parties saw surrealism as a “class enemy” and surrealist artist started to be marginalized. Afterwards many of the surrealist artists stayed in exile and never came back to their home lands. This also naturally affected

<sup>116</sup> Jaroslav Bouček, *27.6.1950 - poprava Závěše Kalandry: česká kulturní avantgarda a KSČ*, Praha: Havran, 2006.

<sup>117</sup> Václav Tomek, Ondřej Slačálek, *Anarchismus: svoboda proti moci*, Praha: Vyšehrad, 2006. p. 577

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* 584.

further development of the movement. The avant-gardist movement never returned to the same position of prominence it had attained during the First Czechoslovak Republic. A small group around Vratislav Effenberger and Mikluáš Medek worked under the Communist regime, but they created a movement of limited strength.

During the reforms of the 1960s, surrealism experienced a certain comeback. Especially art and cinema started to produce works influenced by surrealism and also to a certain extent by psychoanalysis.

Despite this fact, no strong political movement has developed during then 1960s, and advanced theoretical thinking has not been revived. As one member of the Czech surrealist group Milan Náprvník pointed out, despite the fact that many post-war surrealists were students of Karel Teige, they were not able to follow his intellectual legacy.<sup>119</sup> Just isolated experiments appeared within the group without any theoretically-political declarations of the sort which had been declared by Karel Teige.

Marginalization and also to a certain extent discontinuity became evident after 1989. Despite the fact that some of Czech surrealists (E. Bondy, V. Effenberger) worked within the dissidence during normalization, after 1989 surrealists became an isolated group with little impact on the public. At this point, more general factors must be mentioned. Following Tzvetan Todorov's argument, the Czech artist Jan Gabriel pointed out that in the development of the political thought of the 1960s represented the last period of a desire for "great utopism", a desire for something new and absolute. In this vein he more or less declared the "end of Avant-garde".<sup>120</sup> If the idea of future progress (closely connected with utopian thinking) disappeared, then the existence of the Avant-garde no longer had any logic.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Milan Náprvník. *Strmá cesta*. *Tvar*, N 47, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> Jan Gabriel, "O avantgardě" in: *Tvar*, N. 41, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Jan Gabriel, *Ibid*.

In this sense we can understand the statement of a surrealist poet and journalist from 1991 claiming that the “legacy of Avant-garde does not exist.”<sup>122</sup> The only legacy of the Avant-garde he saw were in the critical principles which Avant-garde declared: critical thinking, a sense for scandalism, and a socially radical agenda.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, Dryje posed a serious question: “Does it mean that the outside attributes of the Avant-garde collapsed together with the inner principles of thinking on which Avant-Gard was based?” In this sense Dryje believed that art should be able to answer serious political and social questions. Although he did not see post-Second World War surrealist art as Avant-gardist art and believed that it had lost much from interwar political criticism (such as for example groups RA and 42), he claimed that:

“The inner need for answering serious questions about their time was still present in their artistic thought and for thirty years they produced socially critical projects, although not exactly in the “old” Avant-gardist sense.”<sup>124</sup>

Several attempts were also made within the Anarchist movement, when they tried to show a connection between the avant-garde and surrealists<sup>125</sup>, but among mostly younger members of Anarchist movement an “obscure” group of Czech surrealists did not find much understanding and mutual intersections.

Nevertheless, important similarity between anarchists and surrealists is noticeable. The Czech Avant-Garde was never nationalistic, and Karel Teige refused any references to the nation as an exclusive community and called for the overcoming of national frameworks. In comparison to the rest of the Czech intellectual Left, anarchists and surrealists presented themselves as

<sup>122</sup> František Dryje, “O avantgardě” in: *Tvar*, N. 41, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> František Dryje. “Nikdy nic nikdo nemá...” in: *Tvar*, N. 13, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> František Dryje, *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> František Dryje, José Pierre, “Ani Boha ani Pána: Od anarchism v surrealism k surrealism v anarchism” in: *A-Kontra*, N. 12, 1992. p. 21.

strongly antinationalist. Although during communism they did not find a common language, this feature of anti-nationalism constantly resonated within the Czech radical Left. Anarchists were also the first to bring forth strong social criticism of the renewed phenomenon of racism and xenophobia which strongly increased after the Velvet Revolution.

## Conclusion

Coming to terms with the past was one of the characteristic phenomena of 1990s' politics and was connected with the concrete political praxis called "politics of history" and "politics of memory". Such political methods naturally caused various conflicts, which arose from the "plurality of memories" and different attitudes to the communist period. Within the Czech society, these conflicts were evident from the beginning of the democratic transformation.

The new dominant historical interpretation pointed out the Czech affiliation with the West and 40-year experience under Soviet rule brought a shift from traditional "Slavic brotherhood". Ideas of communism were seen as something imposed from outside, something which opposed Czech inherent democratism. The communist period was seen as a homogenous period, without inner dynamics or any differentiation. The Czech national tradition was founded in democratic traditions of the First Czechoslovak Republic, which was predominantly understood as a Western-type liberal democracy that provided legitimacy for establishing a capitalist economy in the new Czechoslovak state. Against this dominant historical anti-communist discourse appeared opposing discourses. They applied to democracy as well, but through applying them to the specific historical legacy of Czech democratic socialism they subverted the main pillar of the anti-communist narrative – idea of homogeneity of communist rule and idea of "imposition" communism from outside.

Within the Czech post-1989 leftist political discourse I defined two main efforts of establishing another interpretation of modern Czech history. The first called for taking the Prague Spring period into serious consideration. Advocators of this interpretation stressed the fact that

communism was not a homogenous period and had its own dynamics, which means that we can identify different “natures” of Czechoslovak communist rule. This argumentation had one main political goal. By pointing out the differentiation within the Czechoslovak communist period, the argument refused the legitimacy of new legal acts, which excluded part of society from public life because of their communist past. Through the articulation of the Prague Spring tradition, another conception of democracy appeared. By refusing the liberal conception of democracy, advocates of the Prague Spring saw inspiration in the 1960s concept of democratic socialism characterised by the high level of participation and to a certain extent also the self-organization of the society.

The Prague Spring tradition was naturally emphasized by Sixtyeighters, people who actively participated in the Prague Spring reform. With the exception of Miloslav Ransdorf within post-1989 Czech communists (usually post-1968 member of the Party) Prague Spring tradition did not resonate, because these people’s careers were based on the rejection of the Prague Spring reform. Thus, Communists had to find another tradition to affirm their democratic nature. Finally they found it in the intellectual legacy of Bohumír Šmeral who stressed a specific national/regional road to communism and opposed Stalinism. During the Olomouc congress in 1992 the Communist Party declaratively applied to Šmeral’s democratic tradition, but practical communist politics did not respond to this declaration.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of intellectual history Šmeral’s debate brought the next serious subversion of the official historical narrative. Communist intellectual Ransdorf emphasized the national specificity of Šmeral’s communist thought, which was deeply democratic. By this argumentation, Ransdorf showed that communist ideas in its “democratic”

mutation, is part of modern Czech history, and that cannot be seen just as imposition from outside.

Revision of both these traditions (Prague Spring and Šmeral's legacy of national communism) was accompanied by national nostalgia and ideas of national exclusivity. In both cases democracy was seen as something entirely inherent to Czech nation, respectively Czech society. Although similar in their criticism of the new democratic system and its insufficiencies, respectively civilization critique, the Czech Radical Left refused any manifestations of nationalism. Thus, a small space for common language with two previous traditions was found. Because people belonging to the Czech Radical Left were little affected by collaboration with the communist regime, legitimization through history was not a primary interest within this group. References to a national legacy of the Czech radical Left appeared only fragmentary and the nation was never perceived as an exclusive category which could become a bearer of social change. The Radical leftist legacy of the interwar period was discussed, but more or less as a matter of interest, not as political programme.

The 1990s were overall an unfavourable period for emphasizing new Leftist political language and no leftist tradition was incorporated into the official interpretation of Czech national history. Although the Prague Spring was seen always positively, it was usually perceived as an "exceptional cultural effort" and had more or less a nostalgic form. Šmeral's legacy never resonated within the broader public as a part of the national legacy which must be followed. Finally radical leftist projects, were during the early 1990s seen as "foolish" as they still used the disqualified language of revolution and applied the intellectually utopistic streams, which were perceived as outdated. The return of a new, more radical, language to the Czech leftist

vocabulary came in at the end of 1990s with the entrance of a new-generation critique of the capitalist transformation and with the forthcoming alter-globalization movement.

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