The Use of Sociological Knowledge and Methods in the Study of History

This article does not aspire to an overall examination of the subject posed in the title, but to something rather more modest: to analyze the concrete experience of the teamwork by representatives of these two social sciences investigating those developments in this country which climaxed in the attempt at social reform in 1968. Not all historical material is suitable for the application of sociological knowledge and methods, but there are areas in which a true and convincing picture of the past is not possible without the use of such methods. 1968, the events which led up to it and their fateful outcome fall into the latter group.

The necessity of including sociologists in any investigation of the events leading up to the Prague Spring of 1968 arises out of the very character of society at that time.

The processes under way in Czechoslovak society at the end of the 1950s were reshaping it on the basis of new relationships which were founded on individuals' position in society, given their education and qualification, the complexity of their work and their style of life. This caused deep rifts in the original class division of society, since basic social differences began to emerge within one and the same class. Thus a new type of social differentiation began to appear in Czechoslovakia – an apparently vertical stratification based on the increasing spread of the principle of achievement. This process of stratification came up against the prescribed equality of incomes, which worked in favour of the less well-trained and qualified workers within any one stratum. The egalitarian distribution of incomes and the allocation of cadres with this were rooted in the period immediately after February 1948 and the new interpretation brought by the communists. Its fruits were a high percentage of people in management positions without appropriate qualifications and the privileging of a large proportion of labourers. This undemocratic organisation was thus supported both actively and passively by that part of the population for whom this equality was an advantage. It also contributed to the functional interdependence between the bureaucratic apparatus and the groups of workers and employers who were unfairly favoured by the egalitarian system of compensation.

Other social conflicts also developed against the background of this fundamental conflict of interests. Social and political tensions were on the rise in Slovakia, where society was still largely agrarian and the traditional way of life was still strongly in evidence, even though some indicators showed it to be drawing closer to the level of the Czech Lands. In these circumstances, the rapidly increasing younger part of the population was no longer prepared to put up with the country's unequal constitutional position. The new and more highly educated generation which came on the scene in the 1960s had lower incomes, lower standing in their professions and a much lesser share of power, and this made them an extremely sensitive group in society. Social tensions were also heightened between the rapidly growing group of highly qualified professionals and those who lacked qualifications but nevertheless held a large number of posts. The rising level of qualifications also began to make itself felt within the structures of power, where an influential core of young qualified pro-reform people was growing. Nor were the topmost positions in the power structure devoid of conflict, and this created some room for social and political change. The rising tensions also affected the communist party, the size of which made it a mirror for all the conflicts which were appearing in society.

Czech and Slovak society at the beginning of the 1960s was at a crossroads, with a sizable group interested in social and economic change. Opposing them were those forces for whose very existence it was essential to maintain the egalitarian and bureaucratic order unchanged or even to revert to the situation in the first years after February 1948. Conflicts of interest and aims among the decision-makers in the society led them inevitably into conflict and the nature of these interests meant that society as a whole was drawn into the conflict.

The above is a brief and necessarily schematic outline of the state of political development in this country at the time when the reform movement appeared and spread. Through these developments, the Czechoslovak

society acquired those fundamental sociological characteristics[1] which were presented to the Government Commission, set up shortly after November 1989 to analyze the events of 1967-1970.[2] The commission aimed to provide an objective evaluation of the events and it saw the developments in society in the decade leading up to 1968 as the determining factor.

It is also worthwhile asking what methods and what basic information are needed to make sense of the complex reality of those years. It is not enough to analyze the changes in Czech and Slovak society, or even the relations between the countries of the Warsaw Pact and the international power relations.

To some degree the commission recognised the importance of these factors and it therefore decided on a multi-disciplinary study and, as well as historians (who formed the majority), it included lawyers, political scientists and sociologists. Among the latter participated Pavel Machonin, who had carried out the general survey on social differences and mobility in Czechoslovakia in 1967.[3]

The commission also invited other individuals to provide the basic sociological information necessary when considering social development in the crisis years. Róbert Roško wrote a paper on the predominant features of Slovak social structure in the 1960s, Josef Bečvář contributed with an extensive study on public opinion surveys in 1968-1969 and J. Hudeček also dealt with this in his article on opinion surveys concerning the political system in 1968. The commission also received a paper from Lenka Kalinová on the development of the social structure in Czechoslovakia, and various sociologists, Pavel Machonin, Josef Alan, Petr Matějů and Lubomír Brokl, put forward their views in internal discussions on particular aspects of the problems.

The mountain of material received by the team was a virtual "embarras de richesse". They were given special rights of access to all national archives, including those of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ), the Office of the President, the presidium of the government, the Ministries of Internal Affairs, National Defence and others, as well as certain important foreign archives including that of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. Over three years they collected 125,000 pages of previously unavailable documents and from this basis they tried to cast new light on certain parts of the recent past.

The original time limit set for the commission was twice extended and it eventually came to an end at the same moment as the government that had created, in 1992. The three years it had worked proved to be too short a time to write a solid and wide-ranging work on the efforts to reform Czechoslovak society in the 1960s. The commission thus decided to include only some of the sociological information at its disposal in its final report.[4] This was mostly information obtained from public opinion surveys, primarily concerning people's political views.

In the end, only a very small part of the sociological material which could cast new light on the commission's analysis was used, and this was taken primarily from the studies

[1]) See Machonin, P. 1992. *Sociální struktura Československa v předvečer Pražského jara* (The Social Structure of Czechoslovakia on the Eve of the Prague Spring). Praha: Karolinum.

[2]) The Government appointed Dr. Vojtěch Mencl as Chairman of the Commission with Dr. Jozef Jablonický and Dr. Václav Kural as deputy chairmen, and the author of this article was its academic secretary. Seventeen further members were appointed and many historians, lawyers, economists, political scientists, philosophers, sociologists and politicians both from Czechoslovakia and abroad collaborated within the project.

[3]) Machonin, P. et al. 1969. *Československá společnost. Sociologická analýza sociální stratifikace* (Czechoslovak Society. A Sociological Analysis of Social Stratification). Bratislava: Epocha.

[4]) *Československo roku 1968* (Czechoslovakia 1968). 1993. Vol. 1: *Obrodný proces* (The Process of Revival). Prague: Porta. The commission also worked on a much more extensive version of this work, which can be found in the archives of the Institute of Modern History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

by Machonin and Roško. This may have been due to the existence of certain barriers between the various academic disciplines, including history and sociology. Machonin's and Roško's work was written in the language of sociology and used sociological methods, in the assumption that their historian colleagues would be able to understand the sociological approach and its importance for historical research. The historians were not sufficiently well-prepared for such interdisciplinary collaboration. Nor, however, did the sociologists do as much as they could have to help the historians, by providing something of the background knowledge which would have made it so much easier to understand the appearance, development and failure of the reform movement. But this is all the fault that can be found. The fundamental reason for the limited success of the collaboration between these two disciplines and for the inclusion of only the less important sociological aspects in the historical analysis, lies elsewhere.

The documents in the archives were primarily political in nature and the members of the government commission were only too easily drawn to concentrate on the political developments in Czech and Slovak society in the 1960s. The commission saw its first task as the preparation of "studies of the material", dealing purely with original documents. As 1968 was seen as a collision between reforming and conservative forces in society, with the principle field of conflict being within the communist party, the historians concentrated on political materials, documenting the development of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and of the ruling parties of the other countries of the Warsaw Pact.

This approach left no room for considering the development of Czech and Slovak society, the move from a class division of society to its stratification and the resulting conflicts between the interests of different groups, or for analyzing the relationships between different interests, political views and their ideological expression. These are however things which it is difficult or even impossible to understand through the usual methods of historical analysis.

The unwillingness of certain members of the government commission to go beyond the limits of archival materials, to move away from the strictly political and investigate the origins and real significance of the conflicts which the documents bore witness to, inevitably affected the results of their work. The socio-economic processes which began in the late 1950s, and which sociologists discussed in their studies prepared for the commission and which were mentioned at the beginning of this article, gradually contributed to the shifts in sizable parts of society, particularly a part of the Slovak intelligentsia, of Czech and Slovak youth and of the more highly qualified members of many social strata.

This movement first made itself felt in a change of mood. Václav Havel referred to it in the magazine *Kultura 60*, when he wrote that the popularity of the new Prague theatres "bears witness to a deep-reaching shift in the theatrical sense of the times".[5] Havel pointed out that his generation had grown up outside the political confrontation of the 1950s, and he saw the Semafor Theatre in Prague as a spontaneous manifestation of the feelings of this first non-ideological generation. The small theatres, followed somewhat later by the Za Branou Theatre and the Činoherní Club, were an integral part of a wider social movement. Havel also counted in with them the "new wave" of Czech film, some fine art (Medek, Klobasa, Šmidrová), the "New Music" group and the wave of Czech Big Beat, the happenings, the poetry of Hiršal and Grögrová, the writings of Linhartová, Hrabal, Škvorecký and Páral, the plays of Topol, and the group of poets clustered around the *Tvář* (Face) and *Sešity* (Notebooks) magazines, as well as the rapidly growing freedom within the social sciences.[6] There were also many signs of a growing sense of national identity in Slovakia and of the emergence of a

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[5] Havel, V. 1989. *Dálkový výslech*. Praha: Melantrich, p. 41. On several occasions I pointed out to my colleagues on the commission the importance of this work for a real understanding of the development of the reform movement.

[6] Ibid., pp 45-47.

critique within the ranks of the Communist Party.

The sociologists provided the government commission with a view of the social movements of the 1960s as a long term process, deeply rooted in the changes in the socio-economic structure. The open crisis in the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the last months of 1967 marked the beginning of the political phase of this process. The political crisis showed how incapable the conservative leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) was of adjusting its policies to the new conditions created by the social movements of the decade. The forces for reform within the KSČ, backed up by considerable support in society, reacted to these new conditions by creating a federal state, by introducing a greater degree of democracy into the political system and into social interaction, by mixing economic planning with market principles and a wide-ranging validity of expertise and achievement. The fact that the pro-reform forces responded to specific problems in society and to the deep-reaching processes already mentioned, ensured them wide-ranging support and gave them much greater force.

The Government Commission saw the currents of reform within the KSČ and in society at large as separate. They considered that society at the beginning of 1968 was still "relatively inert" and that the plenary session of the Central Committee of the KSČ in January that year was "basically just a struggle between two factions within the totalitarian system".[7] There was no explanation of how, in only a few short months, the struggle between two factions within the totalitarian system in a relatively inert society could produce a movement which forced one of the world's two super powers to send a force of 600,000 men and thousands of tanks against it.

It is clear that the reform movement in 1968 cannot be explained solely within the context of political history and indeed this was why the search for criteria to evaluate it within the latter failed. This was well documented by the Russian historian and archivist R. G.

Pichoja, who published and discussed hitherto unknown documents on Czechoslovakia in 1960 from the meetings of the ‚Politbureau' in the USSR.[8] Pichoja gives a fundamentally different assessment of the reform movement and the policy of the Soviet leadership than that of the Commission. He sees the increasingly brutal pressure from the Soviet leadership on the Czechoslovak reformists as an expression of the very the interests of the USSR and of Communism, and Dubček as having irresponsibly rejected Brezhnev's demands and so as having ultimately forced Moscow to intervene militarily. Pichoja could defend the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia because he never moved beyond the archival material, identifying uncritically with the position of the Kremlin and with its political assessment of the Czechoslovak reform process, and because he equated this evaluation with historical truth.

The sociological analysis of social processes in this country which began in the late 1960s provides important indications as to the nature of the movement which emerged from these processes, showing it to be a social movement rather than purely a political one. This became eminently clear in summer 1968 and in the following eight months in which the civic movement for reform of the political system, the Slovak movement for national equality, the struggle of all active members of Czech and Slovak society for national independence, the efforts of young people, particularly students, to assert themselves as valued members of society, the efforts of workers and highly trained technicians to forge new relations within industry, the efforts of agricultural workers to affirm their rights, all came together into one complex movement aimed at overturning the bureaucratic egalitarianism of Czech and Slovak society. It was this very coming together of such varied currents that gave the reform movement its dynamism, its depth and its striking power, and determined its tragic outcome. The different currents within the movement did not come to reach their peak

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[7]) *Československo roku 1968.* 1993 Vol. 1 *Obrodný proces.* Praha: Porta, p. 29.

[8]) Pichoja, R.G. "Чехословакия, 1968 год. Взгляд из Праги. По документам ЦК КПСС." *Новая и новейшая история,* 1994/6, 1995/1.

at the same time, nor did they all have the same opportunities to influence the decisions of the political leaders, who in any case had very little room to manoeuvre thanks to the pressure from the Kremlin and its allies. The conflict with foreign neo-Stalinist forces was however unavoidable. It was not only a clash between two political cultures, but also, and more importantly, between two societies at different stages of development.

The results of the sociological analysis could have helped the Government Commission to grasp the dramatic nature of this development and so provide a better picture of the many-layered political and social processes of the time. In some cases it would also have helped them evaluate certain phases or concrete events. Unlike the authors of the first volume of *Československo roku 1968*, I do not think that the manoeuvres of the Dubček leadership and their reaction to Soviet pressure (the ruling of the May session of the Central Committee of the KSČ) can be seen as completely mistaken.

One important sociological finding, principally due to Machonin's 1992 study, was the description of the basic types of social groupings whose interests lay in maintaining the social status quo (or even in a return to the situation immediately after February 1948) or on the other hand in their adaptation to different ways of understanding the new conditions. This made it possible for the government commission to try and determine whether these groupings had a political emphasis, and whether or how the relationship between certain socially economic groupings and political tendencies or currents, which appeared at the peak of the social crisis, was determined. The historians in the commission worked with a simplified map of the political forces. They divided the opponents of the reform movement within the KSČ into the conservatives (Novotný, Kapek, Chudík) and the neo-conservatives (Biľak, Kolder, Indra), but were unable to really describe the reform current itself. Within the fast growing movement, individuals under the influence of many and varied circumstances – ideological, group and personal – changed their stance towards the reform movement and did not always act in accordance with their position in society. This did not however change the fact that in the course of the political crisis of 1967-1969 the reform movement was a coalition of social forces, in which very well-differentiated democratic and technocratic tendencies could be distinguished. A detailed analysis of the political stance of the leading figures of the Prague Spring at key moments would make this very clear, but the Government Commission did not unfortunately have sufficient time for such an analysis.

In order to really understand the reform movement, it is important to distinguish between the democratic and technocratic tendencies within it. The technocrats were seeking to perfect the functioning of the political and economic mechanism, which was no small task, and gave this task preference to the reconstruction of social and political relations. When they felt that the democratic demands of the reform movement were threatening their aims, they left the movement and some even moved to the ranks of its opponents. Important members of this tendency included Indra, Štrougal and Černík, who was the only one to remain faithful to the reform movement, despite some wavering. A new situation caused the failure of the Czechoslovak movement after the Czech technocrats had joined forces with the Slovak politicians, having considered the move to a federal state more important than increasing democracy.

The Government Commission achieved a major academic aim in a relatively short time. It collected a massive quantity of previously unpublished material and working from this it built up a picture of the political development of Czechoslovakia at the peak of the social crisis. It was not however able to make use of the possibility which sociology offered of really determining the causes of this crisis.

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