

Introduction to the Symposium *Remembering Prague Spring 1968*

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Kundera 1980: 558–559; emphasis original]

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marek Skovajsa

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University

Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences

References

- Judt, T. 2005. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. New York: Penguin.
- Judt, T. 2010. 'Saved by Czech.' *The New York Review of Books* 57 (4), March 11.
- Kundera, M. 1980. '1968: Prague, Paris and Josef Škvorecký.' *World Literature Today* 54 (4): 558–560.
- Pithart, P. [pseud. Sládeček, J.]. 1980. *Osmášedesátý* [The Year 68]. Köln: Index.
- Rupnik, J. 2008. '1968: The Year of Two Springs.' *Transit* 35.
- Sica, A. and S. Turner. 2005. 'Preface.' Pp. ix–xiv in *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, edited by A. Sica and S. Turner. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.