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978-0-521-55584-5 - The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Transformation of Society

Ladislav Holy

Excerpt

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Introduction

Most of the sociological and political-scientific writing on Central and Eastern Europe is still grounded in a sociological universalism (Kapferer 1988: 3) which treats this region as a politically, economically, and, to some extent, even culturally undifferentiated whole. Various Central and Eastern European countries up to 1989 had essentially the same political and economic system and at present are undergoing what is again seen as essentially the same kind of transformation from a totalitarian political system to democratic pluralism and from a centrally planned to a market economy. Although various countries of the former Eastern bloc displayed many common features which made it possible to perceive the socialist system as radically different from the capitalist and liberal-democratic systems of the free world, there were also considerable differences among them. In so far as Western observers and commentators paid attention to these differences, they explained them by reference to pre-socialist history and political culture (Brown and Gray 1979; Rothschild 1989).

Social equality was an important aspect of the ideology of all former socialist countries, but in Czechoslovakia it was realised in practice to a far more significant degree than anywhere else in Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia eliminated the private sector to a much greater extent and had a more egalitarian income policy than the other states of the socialist bloc. The political system in Czechoslovakia also had its specific features even under communist rule, particularly in retaining the office of president of the republic (Taborsky 1961: 167–72, 182–95).

The ‘velvet revolution’ of November 1989 which abruptly ended communist rule in Czechoslovakia differed significantly from the way in which the communist system was overthrown in other Eastern European countries. The political change in Czechoslovakia, in contrast with, for

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *The little Czech and the great Czech nation*

example, the Soviet Union or Bulgaria, was not instigated by the ruling elites and largely accepted below, but brought about by the open revolt of the population. Perhaps the most significant feature of the 'velvet revolution' was that it was initiated by students, actors, and other intellectuals, whose publicly expressed opposition to the communist regime was swiftly followed by the masses. Although the creation of a post-socialist social order in Czechoslovakia and in what became the independent Czech Republic in 1993 has many similarities with the process which is now under way particularly in Poland and Hungary, it too has its unique features.

The differences in the form of the socialist system, in the way in which it ended and in the process of political and economic transformation which is now taking place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, are the result of the different historical development of these countries and of the different cultures which are the product of this development. The aim of this book is to investigate the specific ways in which Czech cultural meanings and in particular the notion of Czech identity and the accompanying nationalist sentiments have affected life under communism, its overthrow, and the political and economic transformation of post-communist society.

Culture and politics; discourse and text

In discussing the role of cultural meanings in the post-communist transformation of Czech society, I make a distinction between culture and discourse. Following the line of thought developed, among others, by Geertz (1973), Schneider (1976, 1980), and Spiro (1982), I understand culture as a system of collectively held notions, beliefs, premises, ideas, dispositions, and understandings. This system is not something that is locked in people's heads but is embodied in shared symbols which are the main vehicles through which people communicate their worldview, value orientations, and ethos to one another.

Politics has for the most part not been the subject of study as a cultural system. It is still often conceptualised as governed by strictly rational considerations of a purely utilitarian kind, of which considerations of costs and benefits are a classical model. Numerous books by historians and political scientists on the political history of the Czechoslovak state are informed by this conceptualisation of the political, and many anthropological studies of politics have also been grounded in it. Anthropologists have examined politics as a give-and-take in which people follow their material interests as consumers in the market of benefits, rights, duties, and privileges. For many, politics is about interest groups, economic forces, and power relations.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I do not conceptualise politics simply as the pursuit of group and sectional interests independent of any particular culture. My assumption is that politics is an aspect of the overall cultural system and every political action is embedded in a wider cultural context. Thus cultural presuppositions and values which in themselves would not be seen as political (in the strict sense of the term) inevitably influence political action (in the narrow sense of the term). In referring to specific political events I pay less attention to particular policies than to the various symbols through which people make sense of the political process.

A similar conceptualisation of the political has been suggested by those anthropologists who see political action as first of all symbolic. In their view, symbolic action is the main form of interaction of political elites with the public and with each other when they are in public view; it is used to assert the legitimacy of power and to bolster the rulers' authority. Symbols are widely used to arouse emotions and enthusiasm for politics. They are used to express identification with particular policies or political forces and are the main means by which people make sense of the political process, which presents itself to them primarily in symbolic form. All in all, attitudes are shaped more by symbolic forms than by utilitarian calculations (Kertzer 1988). The potency of symbols in political processes derives from the fact that they are vehicles for conception, as Geertz expressed it (1966: 5). In my discussion of specific political events in recent Czechoslovak history, I concentrate on the myths, symbols, and traditions which make possible the identification of people as members of the Czech nation and create Czech national consciousness.

The shared cultural notions underlying and giving meaning to events are invoked not only in symbolic form but also in specific discourses as either implicit or explicit assumptions which underlie their logic or are their explicit subject. The term 'discourse' derives from many different sources and scholarly traditions and in social scientific practice carries different meanings which are often purposely vague (Scherzer 1987: 296). For many writers it is employed in reference to a particular view, model, definition, argument, or even relation. In a more rigorous usage the term has two different senses. Whereas linguists tend to see discourse as units of language that exceed the limits of a single sentence and are produced in everyday communication (see, e.g., Halliday 1978: 109; Halliday and Hasan 1976: 10), anthropologists and some discourse analysts, following the usage shaped largely by Foucault (1972, 1979), tend to see it as a corpus of 'texts' taking spoken, written, iconic, kinesic, musical, and other forms (Seidel 1989: 222) and produced in a variety of contexts (see, e.g.,

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Ladislav Holy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *The little Czech and the great Czech nation*

Fairclough 1989: 24; Fairclough 1992; Seidel 1989; Milton 1993). Adopting the latter view, I take discourse to be socially constituted communication which leads to the production of a set of 'texts'. These need not be written or oral but may be constituted through other modes of expression, for example, through the representational or performative arts. Even in their written or spoken form they need not be restricted to a single genre. 'Culture' I take to be a system of notions, ideas, and premises which is not exclusive to any particular discourse but underlies a multiplicity of them.

My discussion concentrates on discourses which gained prominence in Czech society after the fall of the communist regime, and either could not have emerged under communism or had been driven underground and restricted to a narrow circle of dissidents: discourses on the market economy, various forms of ownership, democratic pluralism, civil society, the environment, gender relations, individualism and nationalism, modern Czech history, and Czechoslovak and Czech statehood, among others. These are all public discourses concerned with issues which the fall of communism and the post-communist transformation of society brought into prominence. In limiting myself to the consideration of this type of discourse I do not imply that they are the only ones which currently exist in Czech society.

Linguistic anthropologists have examined the ways in which grammatical categories are used in poetic, magical, and political discourse and reflect culturally specific ways of expressing meaning and the unconscious patterning of thought (Scherzer 1987). Their insight that to 'study culture we must study the actual forms of discourse produced and performed by societies and individuals' (Scherzer 1987: 306) has, however, been hampered by the fact that they have concentrated mainly on 'the formal patterning principles that organize forms of oral discourse' (Bauman 1986: ix). In focusing on structure they have largely overlooked the fact that discourse also always says something about something (J. B. Thompson 1984: 8, 100; J. B. Thompson 1990: 287ff.). In my analysis of Czech discourses I concentrate not on their structure but on their content. All of them creatively seize on and make explicit what can be seen as basic premises of Czech culture. This is not, however, the only reason I consider discourse an important entry into Czech cultural meanings.

The concept of culture as an ideational system has often led anthropologists to consider culture as a product or object, 'a unitary code of meaning that passes down over time without fundamental alteration and that operates apart from individual or collective action' (Fox 1985: 154).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

More often than not, this conceptualisation of culture has limited our insight into the dynamics of cultural processes, particularly the simultaneous processes of continuity of tradition and constant cultural change. An adequate conception of culture must account for the mechanisms which produce both continuity and change. As many discourse analysts have pointed out, discourse is the locus of such mechanisms (Halliday 1978: 124–5; Scherzer 1987: 296, 306; G. Urban 1991: 17). In discussing contemporary Czech discourses I pay particular attention to the way in which what Czechs consider their time-honoured traditions and deep-rooted cultural notions are reproduced and thus perpetually re-created in the present. These discourses are the locus of “a management of meaning” by which culture is generated and maintained, transmitted and received, applied, exhibited, remembered, scrutinised, and experimented with’ (Hannerz 1987: 550). As Czech culture, like any other, is continuously re-created in contemporary discourses, it is ‘always in the making’ (Fox 1985: 137, 199) and always a ‘work in progress’ (Hannerz 1987: 550). Czechs themselves are able to see it as an enduring and unchanging tradition because any particular discourse is always constructed in opposition to some other (Thomas 1992). The post-communist transformation of society is a situation of dramatic social change. The discourses which have emerged in this situation either have explicitly invoked discourses current in pre-socialist Czech society or have been constructed in conscious opposition to the official discourses current during the socialist period. In either case, by referring to previous historically situated discourses, they keep alive and, in a new historical situation, make relevant the notions expressed in them and thus create the impression of an unchanging cultural tradition. At the same time, because the current discourses are always conceived of as in contradistinction to past ones, they also foster the impression of change. These two seemingly contradictory impressions form the background for my discussion of the notion of Czech identity.

Czechs and Slovaks

National identity, like all other identities, is always constructed in opposition to those perceived as the Other (Cohen 1974; Grillo 1980; Heiberg 1980; Schlesinger 1987). During their nineteenth-century ‘national revival’, Czechs constructed their identity in conscious opposition to the Germans with whom they shared geographical, political, and economic space within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their pursuit of national sovereignty culminated in 1918 with the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic as one of the successors of the defeated empire. Although estab-

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Ladislav Holy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 *The little Czech and the great Czech nation*

lished on the principle of every nation's right to self-determination, Czechoslovakia was in fact a multinational state. Most importantly, it had a sizeable German minority. The Czechs did not feel numerically strong enough to assert themselves against the German element, and therefore the new state was conceived as that of the Czechs, until then part of Austria, and the Slovaks, until then an ethnic minority in Hungary. The inclusion of Czechs and Slovaks in a common state was to the advantage of both. For Czechs it meant the achievement, together with the Slovaks, of an indisputable majority in a multiethnic state. For Slovaks it meant the preservation of their national identity, which had been under constant and ever-increasing threat.

Although Czechoslovakia was a multiethnic state, the Czechs identified fully with it, considering it the restoration of their statehood after three hundred years of Habsburg rule. A growing number of Slovaks were, however, dissatisfied with the dominant role of the Czechs and began to perceive the new republic as replacing their former subordination to Budapest with subordination to Prague. Uneasy Czech–Slovak relations eventually led to the declaration of an independent Slovak state under Nazi tutelage in 1939, the constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic as a federal state in 1968, the confirmation of the federal structure after the demise of communism in 1989, and the eventual separation of Czechoslovakia into independent Czech and Slovak states in 1993.

There were only three federated states among the former socialist countries whose political systems were divided along national lines: the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. All three disintegrated in the aftermath of the fall of the communist system amidst increasing national tensions. The upsurge of nationalist sentiment in Czechoslovakia did not take the violent form that it did in Yugoslavia and parts of the former Soviet Union but manifested itself in prolonged constitutional crisis and political paralysis. The prevailing feeling in the Czech lands – Bohemia and Moravia – is that the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1993 was the result of Slovak nationalism, anti-Czech sentiment, and Slovak separatism.

This book is not a study of Czech–Slovak relations but a study of Czech national identity. In it I try to formulate what it means to be a Czech to those who describe themselves as such. The reason I pay some attention to Czech–Slovak relations is that since the expulsion of the German population from Czechoslovakia in 1945, Czechs have been constructing their national identity mainly in opposition to Slovaks, perceived as their most significant Other. In discussing Czech–Slovak relations, I describe them

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

solely from the Czech point of view. As I lived and worked only among Czechs, I can talk only about how Czechs see the Slovaks but not about how Slovaks see the Czechs. I suggest, among other things, that against Slovak nationalism stands what may be called Czech nationalism: awareness of a separate Czech identity, the deep-rooted conviction of the existence of a Czech nation, and an explicit or tacit identification with it. This Czech nationalism tends to be overshadowed by the manifest Slovak nationalism even for many Czechs, who, paradoxically, manifest it through its vehement denial. This is because it is the nationalism of a dominant nation which, unlike the Slovak nation, had in its own view already achieved sovereignty in the Czechoslovak Republic.

Czech national identity

The disintegration of Czechoslovakia is generally seen as one instance of a general process of transformation taking place in the former communist countries whereby the ideology of communism is replaced by that of nationalism. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, accompanied by the rise of an often violent nationalism, as well as the peaceful disintegration of Czechoslovakia along national lines, reinforces the image of nationalism as 'the last word of communism' (Alan 1992: 8). According to this image, the disintegration of the 'communist empire' is accompanied by the proliferation of nation-states.

However, the image of the rise of nationalism as an ideology which has filled up the ideological vacuum created by the demise of communism is to a great extent an illusion. Verdery (1993) has argued that the roots of ethno-national conflict in the former socialist societies are not to be sought primarily in 'age-old enmities' and that it would be a mistake to imagine that ethnic and national conflicts had been simply suspended and held in 'cold storage' under socialism. On the contrary, national ideology and thinking in national terms were fostered by the political economy of socialism itself, particularly by its 'economy of shortage'. Although this particular explanation does not fit the Czechoslovak case, Verdery is right to point to the presence of nationalist sentiment under socialism, in spite of the suppression of its political expression. As far as socialist Czechoslovakia is concerned, hand in hand with the officially proclaimed ideology of 'proletarian internationalism' went the recognition of the national principle in the organisation of communist society and the communist state. In fact, the importance of this principle pre-dates the communist state. A constitutional decree of August 1945 deprived of Czechoslovak citizenship all Germans except those who had officially

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Ladislav Holy

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The little Czech and the great Czech nation*

adopted Czech or Slovak nationality before the war. Until then, Germans and Hungarians living on Czechoslovak territory had formally been Czechoslovak citizens, although, except for active anti-fascists, they had been considered 'unreliable' ones. The decree automatically confiscating their property took into consideration only their nationality. Consciousness of national identity and membership of a nation have in many other ways been strengthened by official policy. Post-war Czechoslovakia declared itself the common state of Czechs and Slovaks officially conceptualised as two equal nations. The federation of 1968 was a federation of two republics created on a national principle. The parliament – the Federal Assembly – included both the Chamber of the People and the Chamber of Nations, the deputies of which were representatives not of the citizens but of their respective nations. People were made aware of their nationality and reminded that it mattered in the occasional population censuses and in the inclusion of nationality on their identity cards.

The national principle in politics and the division of the political scene along national lines remained in place after the revolution of 1989 in spite of the new political rhetoric emphasising the ideals and values of civil society. The constitutional law of 1991 stipulated once again that the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic was a voluntary union of the two equal republics of the Czech and Slovak nations based on the right of self-determination of each. The post-communist state retained the pre-war system of separate Czech and Slovak political groupings. The most important political organisation to emerge from the 'velvet revolution' was the Civic Forum, operating in the Czech lands; its Slovak counterpart was the Public Against Violence. All but one of the newly established political parties were either Czech or Slovak. The single exception was the Civic Democratic Party, a Czech party that in the 1992 elections campaigned and fielded its own candidates in Slovakia as well. However, the feeling of Czech political commentators was that the party began presenting itself as truly 'federal' too late in the campaign, and because of this failed to gain the 5 per cent of the popular vote in Slovakia necessary for representation in the Slovak National Council (the Slovak parliament).

Verdery (1992) points to various other causes of the rise of nationalist sentiment and xenophobia which are now observable in all former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Among other things, she mentions that nationalism provides a convenient answer to the question of who is to blame for the economic and political backwardness of the former socialist countries in comparison with their Western counterparts. The idiom of national difference has become a convenient means of assigning blame to

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

others. In post-1989 Czechoslovakia, Slovaks habitually blamed the Czechs and Czechs blamed the Slovaks for all the ills of their common socialist past. According to opinion polls conducted in 1991, most Czechs and most Slovaks felt that they were financially subsidising the other nation (*Respekt*, 1991, no. 16: 1).

Because Czech nationalism since the creation of the republic in 1918 has been for the most part the nationalism of a dominant nation, Czechness has not needed to be openly asserted. This has led to the view, expressed some fifteen years ago in the discussion in Czech émigré circles about the meaning of Czechness, that the Czech nation no longer existed – that all that was left was a Czech-speaking population. Awareness of being Czech is tacit (Macura 1993: 11). It is grounded in an implicit awareness of the common historical fate of the collectivity spoken of as ‘we’, but is seldom the subject of an explicit discourse. It becomes such either in situations which are perceived as national crises or when what is tacitly taken as the Czech way of doing things is threatened by those perceived as the Other. In my exploration of Czech identity I concentrate on certain such recent situations which are of special methodological significance because they represent moments of explicit symbolic manipulation. Just as this manipulation makes assumptions about shared national identity transparent to its participants, it makes them transparent to the observing anthropologist. This is in no small measure due to the fact that in such situations symbols are often contested, verbally interpreted, and in numerous other ways explicitly linked to the values, notions, and ideas for which they stand. For these reasons, I use as my main ethnography a few selected events from recent political history, which I discuss more or less in the order in which they unfolded in historical time: the demonstrations in Prague in 1988 and 1989 which preceded the ‘velvet revolution’ of November 1989 (chapter 1), the events of November 1989 and the discussion surrounding the beginning of the transformation of Czechoslovak economy (chapter 5), and the political negotiations over the structure of the post-communist state and the discourse about the independent Czech state (chapter 6).

Examining the first public demonstrations against the communist regime in 1988 and 1989 and the overthrow of the communist system in 1989, I argue that the opposition to the communist system was carried out in the name of the nation and was construed as the nation’s rising against what was generally perceived as foreign oppression. The rise of nationalist sentiment, far from being a result of the fall of communism, in fact preceded it and stemmed from the perception of socialism as an alien, Soviet imposition which had ruthlessly destroyed the traditions and values which

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Ladislav Holy

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The little Czech and the great Czech nation*

people saw as 'theirs'. The opposition to this alien system was construed and understood as 'us' (the nation) standing against 'them' (the alien system embodied in the socialist state), and the overthrow of socialism took the form of a national liberation. Since then, national awareness has been nourished by the pro-European rhetoric of those advocating privatisation, a market economy, and democracy, which has a long history in Central Europe (on Hungary, see S. Gal 1991) and has been instrumental in constructing the dichotomy between culturally specific (i.e., national) and universal (i.e., European) values.

In all the recent political events and situations which constitute my main ethnography, frequent references were made to Czech history, and for the participants themselves what happened became meaningful because of their shared historical knowledge. To understand these events and situations in the same way as they were understood by their participants requires some degree of historical knowledge, and to provide it one could begin the discussion of Czech identity with a brief outline of Czech history. This history is not, however, a straightforward narrative of everything that happened in the past but a selection of certain past events which are ascribed specific meaning because they are understood as contributing in some significant way to the shaping of the present. Just as any other history is constructed from the point of view of the present-day understanding of its subject, Czech history is a narrative of past events constructed from the present-day understanding of what it means to be a Czech. In other words, what is understood as Czech history is a construction which makes possible the understanding that 'we are what we are today because this or that happened in our past'. It is a construction which is an integral part of the discourse which perpetually constructs and reconstructs Czech identity. If one began the discussion of Czech identity by offering any particular outline of Czech history, rather than analysing this discourse, one would be constructing it or participating in it. This is what Czech intellectuals are doing when they construct the narrative of the Czech past or 'at last tell the truth about our history'. And this is also what ordinary Czechs are doing when they either accept the intellectuals' constructions as valid, reject, reinterpret, or simplify them, or select from them what they see as significant for understanding who they are.

To be able to analyse rather than shape the discourse, I cannot therefore begin with an outline of Czech history. Instead, I start my exploration of the cultural construction of Czech identity by describing the sharp separation between the public and the private domains brought about by the almost total abolition of the private ownership of the means of produc-