

POST-COMMUNISM:

Czech Intellectuals and "Post-Communism"

Andrew Stroehlein

"Post-Communism" is one of those strange terms that describes an era by what preceded it rather than by what it actually is. Still, the decade since Communism fell in Central and Eastern Europe can easily be seen as a single unit for the Czech Republic, and as the era was rather ambiguous and multidirectional for the country, the term "post-Communism" is probably as good a name as any to define those ten years.

Post-Communism brought with it much rethinking of democracy and free markets, as intellectuals from both East and West debated about what really made a free, tolerant and democratic society. The cynic would say that the answer remains unknown, as none have ever been created, but the reality of the situation across Central and Eastern Europe shows quite clearly that some countries - Hungary and Poland, for example - are certainly more free and democratic by almost whatever standard one chooses than others, say Serbia or Belarus.

There are indeed degrees of democracy, and the post-Communist world has clearly demonstrated this. But where does this leave the Czech Republic? In the early part of the decade, the country was widely praised for its democratic and economic reforms, but then something seemed to go wrong and the criticisms started to mount.

Some said the problems had an underlying cause - that a "Communist mentality" was proving harder to shake off than at first expected. They emphasised that Czech society had been atomised in the 1970s and 1980s and was only beginning to recover in the mid- to late 1990s. They argued that Czech political culture was deformed and crippled.

To overcome these difficulties, many called for a stronger "civil society" - that layer of society that is run neither by the state nor the family - and a broad volunteer sector. By re-enforcing community spirit and civic involvement, a strong civil society was supposed to strengthen the nascent democracy. However, the trouble for the country's thinkers has always been how to create this essentially grass-roots activity from above. As a solution to society's "trauma of Communism," civil society was inherently flawed.

But the argument that all today's problems can be blamed on the old regime

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is wearing a bit thin ten years after the collapse of that regime. How long does the legacy of Communism really last? Are the Central European intellectuals right to continue emphasising "civil society" as a remedy for a post-Communist environment?

Finally, and most importantly, when does "post-Communism" end?

To begin answering these questions, some details of the issues concerned will be useful.

The "post-Communist mentality"

The current Western focus on major political events and macroeconomic transition has mostly ignored the "mental transformation" away from an authoritarian mindset, but this issue is often discussed in Czech intellectual circles. Before the Velvet Revolution, Normalisation and its effects on Czech culture, society and political thinking were analysed by several dissidents. (1) As we discussed [last week in CER](#), Czech psychologists today discuss the psychological effects of totalitarianism on Czechs (2), and some Czech scholars see the current mental transition as more daunting for the Czechs than overcoming the Nazi era was for the Germans.(3) It is sometimes stated that totalitarian attitudes remain and that many years will be needed before Czechs will be able to identify with democratic values.(4) Few have supported this line of thinking more than President Vaclav Havel.

Havel has talked about the "moral illness" affecting Czechs after totalitarianism in several speeches(5). In one notable speech at the OSCE summit in Helsinki on 9 July 1992, he spoke of the difficulty people in the post-Communist world have in "freeing themselves of all the bad habits, which Communism developed within them." (6)

During the Communist era, independent Czech intellectuals failed to connect with the wider Czech audience: the dissident community in Czechoslovakia was minuscule, and samizdat publications touched only a small fraction of Czech citizens.(7) It is thus worth asking to what extent these intellectuals reach and understand the people today. This is especially relevant given the fact that, during the Communist years, many dissidents lived rather apart from the greater society - either in necessarily closed cliques in the urban centres, in prison or in outright exile. The anthropologist and keen researcher of Central and Eastern Europe in transition, Chris Hann, makes a reasonable point on this subject:

"The critical question is, how realistic, how valid anthropologically are diagnoses such as these (regarding the 'totalitarian mindset')? How well do these thinkers know their own people?" (8)

Judging by the failure of leading Czech intellectuals to understand public attitudes on certain controversial issues in recent years, this is a fair question.(9)

Czech "political culture"

There is a relatively large body of literature, both foreign and domestic, that attempts to explain Czech politics by examining Czech "political culture." Though the Western adherents of political culture would deny it, many political cultural ideas about Czech society and politics seem to stem from

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earlier ideas of the Czech "national character." Similar to works on the Czech national character, the literature of the political culturalists often attributes specific traits to Czechs. The "democratic" and "egalitarian" character of the Czech nation, for example, has often been proclaimed by supporters of both approaches,(10) and to this day, a "myth of the democratic spirit of the Czechs" remains politically important in the Czech Republic itself.(11)

Domestically, there is nothing at all new about attempts to define the Czech national character, and the term "national character" (*narodni povaha*) is not discredited as it is in Western intellectual circles. The discussion, going by the name of "the Czech question," "the meaning of Czech history" (12) or "what we (Czechs) are like," (13) has continued for generations.(14) Self-examination has indeed been a sort of "national pastime" among Czech intellectuals.(15) Some have seen this as a kind of national self-flagellation. (16) These attempts at national self-description are probably as old as attempts to define (and thus invent) the Czech nation itself. In fact, the constant attempts at "national self-definition" seem to be an important re-enforcement of the myth of Czech nationhood.(17)

Clearly in the spirit of the 19th-century Czech national "awakener" Frantisek Palacky and the founder of the First Czechoslovak Republic T G Masaryk, many Western attempts to define the Czech national character in this century have often emphasised the democratic quality of the Czech nation. One is immediately tempted to draw parallels between the fervent support given to Masaryk and Czechoslovakia by RW Seton-Watson and Henry Wickham Steed in the inter-war period (18) and the solidarity with Czech dissidents shown by a later generation of Western intellectuals concerned with human rights (and the development of the Czech national literary tradition) in Normalised Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s.(19) With rather a clear political agenda in mind, both generations helped to promote abroad the myth of the downtrodden-yet-democratic Czech nation.

Flaws in the political culture approach

In the 1970s, however, this particular political cultural argument of the inherent democratic character of the Czech nation was dealt a serious blow by political culturalists' own analysis of the events surrounding the Prague Spring of 1968, which revealed a weakness in the political culture approach itself. Those events were most clearly put into political cultural focus by H Gordon Skilling, in the conclusion of his monumental examination of that period, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*:

"The crisis (of 1968) was in large part the product of the imposition of an alien system, Stalinism, on a country with vastly different circumstances and traditions..." (20)

This matched what the scholar Vladimir Kusin had said five years earlier about the "incongruence between Communism and the Czech disposition" being at the root of the Prague Spring.(21) Some observers, including Kusin, followed this line of reasoning when they defined the subsequent Normalisation as simply the imposition of foreign will without any local legitimacy.(22)

But Skilling himself in the same pages of his great work and in later papers

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realised the inconsistency of this argument when the wider events of the Communist years in Czechoslovakia were taken into account.(23) The crux of the issue was this: If the country's tradition and its citizens were essentially democratic, how could one explain the extremes of Stalinism in the early 1950s Gottwald era and the successful reimposition of Stalinism after the Soviet-led invasion in August 1968? Should not the Czechs' democratic political culture have rejected the "alien system"?(24)

Skilling's answer came with stressing the "heterogeneity" of Czech political culture, and this view was extensively elaborated upon at about the same time by Paul.(25) The argument was that although Czech society had a dominant political culture of democratic and egalitarian values, it also possessed an authoritarian "sub-culture," which explained the apparent effectiveness of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia. Jaques Rupnik added his voice to this argument with his view that Czech politics had an "indigenous Stalinism" which disrupted the traditional "theory of democratic continuity" and had its roots in the Czech working-class and the origins of the Communist Party.(26)

The dualistic political culture theory of "heterogeneity" superficially appeared to address the paradox of Czech Stalinism and Normalisation, but one wonders if such a broad definition of a political culture can have any meaning. If a society contains the potential for both democracy and totalitarianism, how is it different from any other society?

This weakened definition seemed to be just another example of the political culture approach coming too close to the old-fashioned idea of national character. Indeed, it was often reduced to a list of often contradictory traits. This can be seen in Paul's 1979 work where, without any supporting data, he describes Czechs feeling themselves to have the qualities of "democracy, humanitarianism, egalitarianism," "gentleness" and "rationality" but also displaying "passivity," "feelings of pathos and martyrdom," "tendencies towards extremism and anarchy," "messianism," "vengeance" and "a capacity for great cruelty."(27) Such a diverse set of attributes, like the dualistic, heterogeneic approach to the issue of inherent democratic values, only proves that Czechs are human - which is not much information for someone trying to gain insight into Czech society and politics. Political culture has in some senses become the "phlogiston" of East European studies that "simultaneously captures everything and nothing."(28)

One uncertain decade

The true nature of the post-Communist era in the Czech Republic cannot be grasped by references to a historical "political culture" or its predecessor - "national character." Vast generalisations with little content get one nowhere.

Rather than developing theories based on invented history, it is better to simply observe what is happening day by day in the country. The Czech Republic is a young country whose political and economic systems are still weak and poorly defined. Its independent intellectual class has been torn from the wider society and continues to be sidelined in public debates. Western advice to the country has often been misguided. Civil servants are underpaid and inefficient. The public is fed up with politics as usual. These are the realities of today's Czech Republic, and no "national character" is

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Endnotes:

1. The best native examinations are Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless" in John Keane (ed.), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the state in central and eastern Europe* (London, 1985); Milan Simecka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia* (London, 1984); and Milan Simecka, *Konec nehybnosti* (Prague, 1990).
2. See, for example, Jiri Ruzicka, "We Have Not Mourned Communism: A psychological look at the suffering of an era" in *The New Presence*, February 1998, pp. 2-5.
3. Jindrich Fibich, "Problemy transformace a demokratizace mentality cloveka" in Vlasta Safarikova a kol. *Transformace ceske spolecnosti, 1989-1995* (Brno, 1996), pp. 249-289.
4. See *ibid.*; and Vaclav Havel, "The Post-Communist Nightmare", *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XL, no. 10, May 27, 1993, pp. 8-10. Of course, the irony of this whole idea is that it is basically a 180-degree turn on the old political cultural debates. Before, intellectuals claimed that the Czechs were a democratic people living in a totalitarian system, and now many of the same intellectuals claim that Czechs behave with a totalitarian mindset although they are living in a democracy.
5. In several speeches including Vaclav Havel, "Projev k obcanum na Novy rok/Praha 1. Ledna 1990" in *Projevy: leden-cerven 1990* (Prague, 1990), pp. 11-19.
6. Vaclav Havel, *Vazeni obcane/Projevy cervence 1990 - cervence 1992*, (Prague, 1992), pp. 194-197.
7. Milan Otahal, *Opozice, moc, spolecnost 1969-1989* (Prague, 1994), p. 34.
8. Hann, *The Skeleton at the Feast*, p. 21.
9. For example, many leading Czech intellectuals were completely out of tune with their countrymen on the issue of the Czech-German Declaration. Andrew Stroehlein, *Czechs and the Czech German Declaration: The Failure of a New Approach to History* (Glasgow, 1998), The Glasgow Papers No. 1, 1998.
10. An explanation of these traits of the Czech "national character" is given in Zdenek Salzman, *A Contribution to the Study of Value Orientations Among the Czech and Slovaks*, Research Reports No. 4,

Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, April 1970. For the "political culturalist's" approach which leads to the same conclusion, see David W. Paul, *The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics: Change and Continuity in Socialist Czechoslovakia* (New York, 1979), pp. 76-77. The importance of the "democratic tradition" in Czech political culture is emphasised and summarised from a Czech point of view in Emanuel Pecka, "Development of Political Culture in the Czech Republic" (copy in author's possession), which among other things thoroughly confuses "national character" and "political culture."

11. Kieran Williams, "National Myths in the New Czech Liberalism" in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (eds), *Myths and Nationhood* (London, 1997), pp. 132-140. Page 135 is cited here.
12. These phrases entered into public debate in the first pages of T.G. Masaryk, *Ceska otazka: snahy a tuzby narodniho obrozeni* (1894), published together with *Nase nynesi krize: pad strany staroceske a pocatkove smeru novych* in 1936. The combined work was republished in 1990 by Nakladatelstvi svoboda in Prague. The "Czech question" was earlier formulated in different ways by Kollar, Palacky and Havlicek among others, and Masaryk acknowledges his debt to his predecessors in the brief introduction on pages five and six of that edition of *Ceska otazka*.
13. From the title of Ferdinand Peroutka, *Jaci jsme* (1924).
14. The course of the extensive domestic discussion of the Czech "meaning of history" and the development of the national myth is summarised in Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (London, 1994), pp. 147-190, briefly in Pecka, "Development of Political Culture in the Czech Republic" and also, from a political cultural perspective, in Paul, *The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics*, pp. 185+.
15. V.V. Kusin, "Nationalism and the Reform of Communism in Eastern Europe", unpublished paper, pp. 7-8 cited in Paul, *The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics*, p. 185.
16. This phenomenon has been noted in Paul, *The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics*, p. 189 and Pynsent, *Questions of Identity*, chapter 4, and both authors have related this to the "Czech martyr complex" as well as Masaryk's idea of collective Czech martyrdom expressed in *Ceska otazka*. For some recent examples of national self-flagellation see Jiri Pehe's comments on Czech "provincialism" in relation to the issue of the Czech-German Declaration in *Slovo* 3.2.1997 and *Slovo* 7.5.1997. Similar views on this issue were expressed in *Slovo* 17.2.97 by Havel, who coincidentally serves as somewhat of a martyr for the Czechs as well (Andrew Stroehlein in *Slovo* 4.2.97).
17. To call a nation a myth is no slight. All modern "nations" are essentially 19th-century inventions - myths created and maintained by intellectuals unifying diverse linguistic and cultural groups. They are, indeed, "imagined communities." See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991).
18. See, for example, Henry Wickham Steed's introduction to T.G. Masaryk, *The Making of a State: Memories and Observations, 1914-1918* (London, 1927), and R.W. Seton-Watson, *25 Years of Czechoslovakia* (London, 1945 (1943)) especially pp. 5-6 where the author asks the reader to evaluate the "clear continuity of (democratic) political

- thought" of the Czech nation "which has from early times stood in the van of intellectual, religious and political freedom." Precisely because Seton-Watson was both "chief advocate and interpreter of the Czechoslovak state in Great Britain," his observations on Czech "national character" are tremendously slanted. (The title comes from the editors' introduction to R.W. Seton-Watson, *Documents/Dokumenty, 1906-1951* (Prague, 1995), edited by Jan Rychlik, Tomas D. Marzik and Miroslav Bielik.
19. See the exchange of letters between Czech dissidents and foreigners and the forward by Arthur Miller in Hans-Peter Riese (ed.), *Since the Prague Spring: Charter 77 and the Struggle for Human Rights in Czechoslovakia* (New York, 1979); and Skilling's preface to H. Gordon Skilling, *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia* (London, 1981).
 20. H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton, 1976), p. 834.
 21. Kusin notes at the beginning of his study of the period: "Incongruence between Communism and Czech national disposition has a history which reveals long and genuinestriving for socialism *as a socially just form of democracy* in conflict with Communism *as a system of autocratic organization and, eventually, government*. Vladimir V. Kusin, *The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring: The Development of Reformist Ideas in Czechoslovakia 1956-1967* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 1. Italics in original.
 22. Vladimir.V. Kusin, *From Dubcek to Charter 77: A Study of 'normalisation' in Czechoslovakia 1968-1978* (Edinburgh, 1978), p.145.
 23. Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, p. 825 and H. Gordon Skilling "Czechoslovak Political Culture: Pluralism in an International Context" in Archie Brown (ed.) *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (London, 1981), pp. 115-133, and H. Gordon Skilling, "Stalinism and Czechoslovak Political Culture" in Robert C. Tucker (ed.) *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1977), pp. 257-280.
 24. The question, of course, ignored the widespread non-violent resistance to the invasion in 1968, recalled by witnesses, later authors and documentary publications. See Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its aftermath: Czechoslovak politics 1968-1970* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 42. See also the examples of minor acts of resistance collected in Jindrich Pecka (ed.), *Spontanni projevy prazskeho jara 1968-1969* (Brno, 1993).
 25. Skilling "Czechoslovak Political Culture: Pluralism in an International Context" in Archie Brown (ed.) *Political Culture and Communist Studies*, Skilling, "Stalinism and Czechoslovak Political Culture" in Robert C. Tucker (ed.) *Stalinism and Paul, The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics*. See especially chapter 3.
 26. Jaques Rupnik, "The Roots of Czech Stalinism", in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (London, 1982), pp. 302- 320. See especially pp. 302, 302 and 313. This idea of "heterogeneity" is not too dissimilar from Holy's observed "multivocality" of discontinuous Czech images of the national past, though Holy elaborates more extensively on the relationship between the opposed images. Ladislav Holy, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National identity and the post-communist social transformation*, (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 118+.

27. Paul, *The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics*, pp. 186-7.
28. Frederic J Fleron, Jr., "Post-Soviet Political Culture in Russia: An Assessment of Recent Empirical Investigations" in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 1996, pp. 225-260.

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