

Spor o smysl českých dějin 1895-1938
(The Controversy Concerning the Sense of
Czech History 1895-1938).

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Praha, Torst 1995, 869 p.

It might seem that the publication of an anthology of texts which documents the protracted „Controversy Concerning the Sense of Czech History 1895-1938“ is merely a report on the past and a reproduction of the discussions on this controversy, and that, furthermore, this publication would have little, if anything, to communicate to the contemporary situation in the Czech Republic, where everything has changed. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that this event should be given exceptional attention.

Above all, it is necessary to reflect upon the fact that the historical cleft in the development of our national community between the years 1939-1989 renders the period preceding those years less distant than the number 50 might, at first glance, suggest. It is only today that we have the opportunity to assess – in peace, as a whole and wholly free – the entire collection of studies from the wide circle of authors on which little has been said or whose work has been misinterpreted over the last half-century: T. G. Masaryk, J. Kaizl, J. Vančura, K. Krofta, J. Pekař, J. Herben, Z. Nejedlý, F. M. Bartoš, J. Jareš, E. Rádl, J. L. Fischer, F. X. Šalda, J. Slavík, K. Miklík, K. Kupka, J. B. Čapek, K. Stloukal, J. Werstadt – even the confrontation of these significant actors' perspectives in the discussions provides an interesting angle to the understanding of our national history and intellectual/spiritual endeavours such that the presentation alone of this historical picture demands high praise be accorded the anthology.

Of course it does not only concern a deeper recognition of time-specific controversy. The evaluation of their significance for our historiography as well as considerations on the possibilities and choice of texts I will leave to the competent experts. I am not an historian and therefore have chosen to limit myself to certain questions of a philosophical-sociological nature.

In terms of its content, the anthology is, in my opinion, is rich the research on Masaryk, focusing on the key theme of his thought and practice. The anthology testifies the depths to which Masaryk influenced our scientific and cultural-political life, and more especially, it testifies to the fact that in the years of the interwar republic, Masaryk was not only a revered symbol: his thoughts were always subject to a multidimensional objective critique. Within the controversies, it will be immediately clear (when we pursue them from the perspective of *Wissenssociologie*) how the reflections on our national existence, identity and their developmental paths were founded on the historiography and philosophy of Czech history. Reflections of this kind do not lose their actuality with the passing of historical time: indeed, their insistence today – in a dramatically changed Europe and within the new Czech statehood – has increased significantly.

It would also be possible to close the door on such considerations. I have no doubts that there are both reviewers and scientists who would find many good reasons for thrusting this subject into the past. They could, for example, argue as follows: the question as to the sense of history is a pseudo-problem, a leftover from conceptions of the logic of historical development, a metaphysical residue which imposes hidden meanings on the chaos of historical conflicts from without, scientifically unverifiable constructs, a reassuring *metarécit*, a personification of history and nation. Certain goals are only formulated by individuals, whereby history constitutes their result – various human activities, an unintended result of intentional action, from which, all too often, something quite different emerges from what people originally sought. It is only after the fact that people, in a desire for self-reassurance, strive to bestow historical non-sense with a sense.

Such reflections (I leave aside the question as to whether or not they be post-modern) can invalidate the question itself. Nevertheless, it is interesting that in thoroughly dedicating oneself to the texts in the publication, one comes up against all the aforementioned objections. Even at the time of their initial appearance, several levels of the whole question

came into view, none of which, in my opinion, have been definitively dealt with as a real problem by contemporary philosophy and science (until this very day).

It is, above all, a question of the relation of philosophy and sociology to historiography. In the case of Masaryk and his conflict with Pekař, it can be seen as a difference between a philosopher of history (or a typologising sociologist) and an historian, (the latter) who seeks to depict past events which are based on the maximum number of carefully collected and ordered facts. In this context, one can apply the concept of an „ideogram“ to Masaryk's philosophy of history – a concept which Václav Černý (and Karel Čapek before him) employed in the exposition of Masaryk's approach to belletristic (V. Černý: „F.X.Š a T.G.M.“ *Host do domu* 1967, no. 12): the authors and the heroes are not, in Masaryk's approach, the creators and products of an artistic artefact – they are merely typical representatives of or certain ethical-philosophical and social stances towards the world. Analogically speaking, one could say that for Masaryk, the historical products, époques, personalities and events are ideograms, the bearers of certain meanings, whose ordering creates an illusion of continuity – a vision of the sense of history: the Bohemian Brethren, the reformation, Jan Hus, the national revival, Havlíček and so on – all these historical phenomena are for Masaryk an expression of the secularisation, of the concept of humanity, of the democratic tradition, an opening of the space for individualism and critical thought, an expression of the inner weight of Czechness, the appeal for civilisation, of peaceful approach to politics.

A further important distinction is connected with this – the controversy over the sense of Czech history as a controversy over „dual historiographies“ (F. X. Šalda), a duality in the approach to the historical material. Masaryk expressly declared himself (in, for example, his unpublished response of 1928 to Pekař, entitled „Masarykova česká filosofie“) a proponent of „[understanding] history“ *verstehende Geschichtswissenschaft* (indicating German historians); thus Masaryk can be placed within the current of the *Geisteswissenschaftler*, which, in contrast to the positiv-

ist conception, champions the interpretative approach to the sciences dedicated to human beings and society. Hence, after thorough comparison of Masaryk's sociology with the mainstream sociological theories of the 19th and 20th centuries, Jiří Musil has placed Masaryk in proximity to the theories of symbolic interactionism (Jiří Musil: „Masarykova sociologická teorie: co je z ní stále živé.“ *Masarykův sborník*, VIII, Praha 1993).

The third level of the problematic concerns the relations between the philosophy of history, historiography and politics – a relation which, without a doubt, lead to a radicalisation and broader publicity of the controversy as well as to the transgression of the border of purely scientific, academic discussion. For Masaryk, it was above all a question of the creation of a national-emancipatory programme, through which historical references were incorporated into the contemporary political polemics, into the concrete conception of Czech politics : namely under the conditions of the autonomous development of Czech society within the Austro-Hungarian framework, in the context of the First World War, and with the building up of the independent national state. Masaryk's philosophy of Czech history indisputably shows signs of purposeful construction, which played a significant and positive political role. This does not mean, however, that no concrete historical objections could be formulated against it. The risk of this also arises in those situations when the problems of history – quite naturally – insinuate themselves in „extra-scientific“ contexts. The French revolution of 1789, for example, became an historical event, from which the French people derived their Republican statehood; nevertheless to this very day, the French have passionate arguments concerning their interpretation of this event. In addition, there should be no doubt as to the fact that Masaryk himself - through his robust, and in a certain sense, charismatic personality - contributed to the intensity of the controversy.

The fourth dimension is also connected to this – being the connection between the activist traits of Masaryk's personality with the orientation of his entire thought: with his approach to nationality, with his conception of

national existence as an active creation and as a task which stands before us – thus, not as a simple continuation of a set, completed, given, ethnic (linguistic-cultural) community. By „sense“, Masaryk not only signifies a „telos“, but also the creation of a quality of national life through the connection of our activity to the stable vertical (the perspective of eternity, the integration of the supernatural democratic and humanist values). Such, for example, was F. X. Šalda's immediate reaction to Masaryk's *Naše nynější krize* (F. X. Šalda: „Těžká kniha“, 1895. In: *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, vol. 11, Praha 1950). Likewise, Erazim Kohák signifies Masaryk's conception as „ethical“ – and not „ethnic“ – and Jan Šimsa (in his contribution to the 1994 Hodonín conference on the religious dimension of Masaryk's thought) interprets Masaryk's term „question“ as „task“.

One could say that in these last two points, there is no difference between Masaryk and Pekař: rather, they have passed one another by. The published texts contribute to the return of Masaryk's name to the current scientific discussions, in which, for example, the all-too-strict formulation of the alternative „Masaryk or Pekař?“ (or similarly, the most recent alternative „Masaryk or Patočka?“) can be solved at a more subtle level.

The debate did not come to an end in the year 1938. A further dramatic historical development authored certain sequels to the Czech question: beginning with Nejedlý's combination of patriotism and Stalinism, through the attempts for „socialism with a human face“ with the ensuing considerations on the „unself-evidence of a nation“, on the Fate of the Czechs, through the controversies in samizdat and exile literature on the success or failure of the philosophy of Czech history, on the moral failure – or otherwise – of the Czech nation, through to the emancipatory year, 1989. Thereafter, a rapid course of events which placed the Czech question in radical new contexts: the renewal of the democratic statehood, the unsuccessful attempt to maintain a common Czecho-Slovak state, reflections on the national and state identity in the independent Czech Republic, the Czech-Czech and Czech-German dialogues, the controversies over national holidays, the efforts towards a pluralistic

and ecumenical community, the problematic of the positioning of the Czech Republic within European integration, the debates on the need for a broader vision of the future...

Hence, the publication of this anthology could in no way be viewed as a simple retrospective. In reading it, we are increasingly more aware that it is extremely necessary to continue - to publish yet a second or even a third volume which would encompass the last 50 years.

The author of the introductory study therefore rightly places the theme within the context of the post-war reflections. One must also give credit to the manner in which this author accomplishes the complex task of selecting and ordering the texts, as well as to his explanation of this process and the analysis of the key positions of every actor within the controversy.

I in no way think that the subsequent parts of this edition will be ‚Czechocentric‘, focusing solely on the small Czech community. It has become clear that it is inconceivable that the „Czech question“ be viewed in any other terms than the „European question“ and, indeed, the „global question“. Not that the Czechs have been singled out from all other peoples to deliver new, unexpected truths. The reason is less grand: the reflections on the experiences of a small nation in a sensitive, eventful space are reflections which contribute to the search for an answer to the problems of the contemporary historical situation which is characterised by the breakdown of the bi-polar world.

I think that the permanent posing of the Czech question is no Czech illness (even if the symptoms of fever and hypochondriac hyperventilation are sometimes encountered here): this question may also be a cryptogram for a general existential problematic of the contemporary humanity which is pluralistic, multicultural and fearful of the crisis. These are the old problems: Who are we? What can we know? What can we hope for? Where can we go? What may we do?

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