

The Czech Transformation – The Universal and the Particular

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Abstract: In the economic, political and social transformation of the post-communist countries of East-Central Europe some groups of values are asserting themselves. These are different in themselves and in the degree of their universal validity, and on the other hand they are connected with the specificity of the historical processes pertaining to these countries. Universal values and general civilisational characteristics and their historical continuity create the main feature of western society, and at the same time, the general modernisational goal of the directing of the transformation. In opposition to this are the subjective projects and illusions of individuals and groups concerning the possibilities of the transformation, especially those formed in political movements after the revolution of 1989, and these have the quality of being particular and discontinuous. General post-revolution democratic, liberalisation, and privatisation changes represent a separation with the past, but are at the same time interconnected with it. This group of values including the inherited mentality, and the cultural and social capitals of the past (the so-called politics of national interest), intervene in a determining way in the character of the changes and in creating universal institutions and individualisation processes of transition.

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At the beginning of 1990, one could speak of a “principal openness” or even an original innocence in the economic and political transformation processes of the Central European post-communist states – especially when the necessarily universal character of these processes and the absence of any preliminary theoretical studies or normative guiding principles of change [e.g. Offe 1991] were emphasised as the *differentia specifica* of these processes. Jürgen Habermas nevertheless perceives the ongoing process of a “catching-up revolution” (*die nachholende Revolution*) in such “openness”. He points to the absence of new mobilising ideas and to the awareness, in the place of such ideas, of deficits in the social order, and the corresponding sober attempt to do away with them was to be asserted [Habermas 1990: 181].

The course taken by the transformation process thus far continues to be described as universal, uniform, westernising. It is seen principally as a process which occurs identically in all the countries of “pragmatic socialism”, in which each of the countries concerned has been at best “an exception in the transition”. Today, such a view is manifested in a particularised form, the analysis of which may well require a different, historically longer-sighted perspective.

The first phase of the economic, political, legal and social reconstruction was most prominently programmed in the privatisation of “nationalised” property; in the liberalisation of prices combined with controlled inflation, the liberalisation of foreign trade and the simultaneous control of exchange rates; in the democratisation of political life and the “reinvestment of rights” into social life; and in the restructuring of industry and the mod-

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ernisation of production. This reconstruction is being realised in the various post-communist countries at varying speeds and in different ways. Nevertheless, the reasons for these differences and shifts in emphasis should in no way be interpreted from an exclusively socio-political perspective, as the results of, for example, social threats (to individuals, groups, classes etc.) or the disappointing gap between expectations and results – not, therefore, as they have on occasion been interpreted with regard to the most recent election results in some post-communist countries. Here the individual historical foundations of each country seem to come into play. These can appear either as attempts to restore former market, democratic, national and other institutions (as J. Habermas observed [1990: 180]) or, on the contrary, as ways of clinging to the allegedly positive aspects of the “pragmatic socialist” regime. In this light, the entire transformation process seems to resemble an attempt to make the laborious border crossing to a market economy with rucksacks from the past, in which it is hoped to smuggle something of the earlier, etatistic times.

Not only the *new* – its independence, possibilities and relevance to the present – and not only its differences from the old, but also the *old* itself and its “presence in the *new*” is apparently becoming an increasingly acute problem. It is perhaps fitting at this point to recall Alexis de Tocqueville, who once tried to show that the French Revolution “brought far fewer innovations than is commonly assumed” and that its “real achievement” is to be seen more in the fulfilment or even a definitive acknowledgement of a lengthy process of changes, the inner necessity of which had its roots well back in the pre-Revolutionary period. When seen from this point of view, a whole range of concrete results – such as “administrative centralisation”, the “guardianship of administration”, the independence of justice etc. – turn out not to be “achievements of the Revolution (or of the Empire),” as was claimed in de Tocqueville’s times, but “rather the products of the *ancien régime*” [de Tocqueville 1978: 36, 48].

The above should not be read as some purely conservative emphasis of historical continuity, but rather as an indication of the historically perpetual tension between the general and the particular. In this way, attention is drawn to more general historical polarities which can also be categorised under the headings of *continuity* and *discontinuity*, *tradition* and *change*, *integration* and *differentiation*, *history* and *system* or even *the universal* and *the individual*.

We thus arrive at what Heinrich Rickert once called “individual causality” [Rickert 1929: 388ff.], in which the historically individual, the specific and the anomalous turn out to be the necessary, and in which the universal can be wholly marginalised.

Historiosophically, we find ourselves facing a “*split*” (*Entzweiung*) [Hegel 1801: 173] in the concept of “*necessity*” which guides our sights precisely to that specific complementarity which was originally intended to represent an energy of objective progress and development. This energy has always constituted an important foil for the understanding of social changes. Moreover, it is in this energy that the individual and the specific (which clearly does not always have to mean the contingent), and the objectively necessary and universal, mutually necessitate one another.

On the one hand, what we are dealing with are the necessarily globalising and unifying components of economic, political, and societal changes which are radically expelling the old economic, legal and constitutional order and are removing the “pragmatic socialist” rules of social integration. The various resulting constraints, regroupings and

changes in the social status of groups and individuals, in the social dynamic, in forms of socialisation, and the consequent release of tendencies toward the mass homogenisation of life and the assertion of various cultural values – many of which are felt as foreign – can be perceived by the population as disorientating or even threatening (indeed, this is borne out by most investigations).

A part of this objectivising side of the split is constituted by those transformation phenomena that the Hungarian sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge analyses as “quasi-intentional” and which she places parallel to the desired, proposed and unexpected features of the transition [Ferge and Miller 1987: 297]. These features also seek to accentuate developments which, although unintended, did not occur without people’s awareness of them – developments which have merged with the transformation to such an extent that they will continue to influence the political and social structure well into the future: from money laundering to attempts to retroactivate justice, to underestimating the consequences of the transformation of the education system (e.g., the legal introduction of school fees).

Finally, there are other, new demands which place a very pressing task before the near-complete restructuring of the economy, the legal system and politics: the overcoming of the actual differences which are relatively constituted on western averages (of productivity, quality, mobility as well as of living standards etc.). These differences seem to be gaining in importance and will no doubt necessarily bring with them still more radical measures in the areas of state expenditure, the structuring of industry, wage and price regulations, tax policy and so on. Furthermore, they reveal the already existing institutional lacunae.

On the other, subjectivising side of the split, we are confronted with the individualising, sometimes particularising components of the transformation process. This process is important not only with respect to the various forms of the cultural sedimentation of changes and the creation of stabilising institutional frameworks for these changes; it is also important for its potential capacity to orient social behaviour and for bringing with it in a self-generated independent form the various “positive” and “negative” dimensions of the old. Here we are confronted with the burden of the old redistributive-egalitarian habits and demands, intellectual illusions and anti-meritocratic stances on the one hand, and on the other, the natural demands for the preservation of individual and collective identity. These demands are bound up with the needs of authenticity, individual biography and continuity of orientation in life, all of which are rooted in both personal experience, which has not been depreciated, and in the productivity of generational experiences. This side of the split seeks to defend the rights of individuality and self-responsible subjectivity.

It is on this side of the split, too, that we must place all of the cultural, historical and social-psychological realities that are often analysed as problems of political culture or thematised under the rubric of “mentalities” which can either strengthen or weaken new institutions. The nature of their influence on the transformation process and its form can be extracted through the following (intentionally pointed) question: “Are the “positive” results of the Czech transformation to be deemed the success of a unique strategy by Václav Klaus, or rather are they rather an achievement of a “Czech mentality” (which has changed over the long term)?

The “Pandora’s boxes full of paradoxes” [Offe 1995: 66] which political analysts are constantly confronted with arise in the area of the mutual dependence (as well as the

asymmetries and antagonisms) of the market economy and democracy, and are not only enlarged but also enriched by the productivity of this split.

Nevertheless any attempt to opt entirely for one or the other side of the division (and thus to reject the other), or to let one be absorbed into the other helps equally little as with all of the various illusions of a dialectical resolution. The one-sided over-emphasis of the first, objectivising and at the same time synchronising component of the division culminates in Fukuyama's thesis on "the end of history" [Fukuyama 1989]: that a welfare economy combined with a liberal democratic parliamentarism seems "to be all there is" – both in the empirical and the normative sense. In this case the entire transformation could really be understood as only a necessary move in this end-game. There would be no possibility for new models to follow; all that would be left to politics would be the fine-tuning of details or minor repair jobs.

All too often in the Czech Republic, the dominant social scientific analysis of, for example, the changes in the originally "pragmatic socialist" egalitarian-antimeritocratic social structure, under the pressure of the privatisation and the evolving market, as well as the asymmetrical orientation of the process of the emergence of a new middle class, seem to steer the conception of the transformation in this direction.

And vice versa: a huge exaggeration of the other, the individualising and particularising components of the split can legitimise adherence to the really or allegedly rewarding historical models, and it can lead to the articulation of various cognitive styles (group, local, etc.), thereby simultaneously bringing with it the decentralisation of the crucial points or weaknesses of the objective demands on the political, economic and social transformation and introducing an unproductive and illusory transformation. The revival of nationalism and ethnic regionalism in almost all of the post-communist states is, in this context, one of the most striking examples of this.

I believe that we should conceive the general character of this split as positive and productive: namely, as a natural sign of the transformation's movements and changes, as an essential mode of its self-preservation, perhaps even as mode of existence of the modern in our time in general. Hence Anthony Giddens recently – albeit with a different intention – sought to draw attention to something similar while writing on the complementarities between the fragmentation of experience and the unification of social life, between the "disembedding mechanisms" of the modern and the "reflexive" reconstitution and stabilisation of the modified, between the modern connection of the local and the global and so forth.

The split should therefore be seen as a permanent tension (in the social-ontological sense) which lends the transformation an historically individual form and, simultaneously, as a compensatory force (in the sense of an integrative "transformation spirit"; an "organising" ideology for various local and group thought patterns) which "temper" development and in which the historical continues to function. On the one hand, the split enables inwardness and tradition – the individualising "causality from freedom" – to resist the constraints of pseudoscientific objectivity and the "corruption of reason" (with its unifying constraints which lead to the de-individualisation of life and the socialisation of freedom). On the other hand, this tension must also be understood as signifying that the universal – that which is generally true and objective in every romantic return to history – will impede, if not wholly prevent, any fundamentalism of faith or values as well as – we hope – political totalitarianism.

Addition

I think that in every analysis of the transformation, it is important to point out the “split nature”, the “difference” present in this transformation. That which Max Weber once formulated as the important task of a “science of reality” – namely, the understanding of the “fact of having become this and not that” of each historical individuality – arises from the tension (in a necessary split and at the same time a split necessity) between the universalising and particularising traits of the transformation and at the same time between the continuity and discontinuity of the final states. This means that we should not see the transformation exclusively as an “installation” of the new, but also in the context of a “survival” of the old; we should not see it only as an implementation of the abstract and of objective necessity, regardless of the traditional, or even regardless of those elements which objective necessity has rejected from life as superfluous.

	Universality	Particularity
Continuity	the most general civilising characteristics (Europeanness, enlightenment, educational systems of institutions, Christianity, urbanisation, science, industrialisation, secularisation, humanism, society, “world history”, functions of the middle class, etc. RATIONALITY	Mentalities, traditional value systems, “atheism”, egalitarianism, national culture and national interests, social and cultural capital, “the capitalism of a nomenclature,” historicism, etc. IDENTITY
Discontinuity	the radical changes of power politics, privatisation, price and trade liberalisation, the state under the rule of law, new institutions, “political politics,” a “market without adjectives,” “managerism”, etc. NECESSITY	the role of dissent, the smoothness of the process of change, “apolitical politics”, the role of celebrities and intellectuals overall, a market with adjectives, a course of normalisation, etc. SUBJECTIVITY

This primitive table is intended merely to show that identity is not a synonym for our rationality; rather, it is far more the result of the history of our origins, the visualisation of which we agree upon, but cannot justify. Undoubtedly, it can be applied to the majority of the countries in transition in Central Europe. The otherwise apparent differences thus develop during the classification of their individual, specific, and historically differentiated contents. It is also possible to discuss to what extent the relationships between the individual segments of the table can be designated as complementary or compensatory relationships. The visualisation of all four segments can most probably be seen as complementary, while the diagonal connection between the particularising traits of the transformation and the discontinuous elements of universalising objective (political and economic) necessity shows the compensatory nature of the split. This relationship between the discontinuity of the universal and the continuity of the particular can be interpreted as the

source from which so-called "historical alternatives" arise, and where most of the (philosophical) problems of the foundation and orientation of meaning develop.

It is only in this tension, which is perhaps personified by our President, Václav Havel, and our Prime Minister, Václav Klaus, that the foundations for the long-term process of social modernisation, which alone – so most people believe – can lead us back to Europe, should be constructed. The country's current difficulties and the population's self-sacrifice will thereby be justified and legitimised. And perhaps then the transformation will attain an over-arching historical meaning, as it will have contributed to that which made the old system disintegrate: the conquering of social stagnation, individual and social unfreedom and civic and moral irresponsibility.

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