The Questions of 1968: Background, Context and Retrospect

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The fiftieth anniversary of the May 1968 events in Paris, and of their less spectacular analogies elsewhere in the West, has attracted worldwide comment and re-evaluation. Much less is said about 1968 in the erstwhile communist world. That part of the story was, admittedly, confined in the main to one country, and came to a more brutal end than anything on the other side of the iron curtain. But closer examinations of the Western 1960s and their sequel have increasingly stressed the limits, illusions and paradoxes of these historical experiences. The protest movements were short-lived; if they had an impact, it was of a very different nature than what they had aspired to, and variations from country to country were much more important than they seemed at the time; neither protagonists nor interpreters came anywhere near an adequate grasp of the world-changing processes at work in the wider environment. Explaining the differences of cultural memory in East and West in terms of relative historical weight will therefore not get us very far. To understand the particular amnesia that has obscured the significance of the Prague Spring, the specific Eastern European version of the *fin-de-siècle* ideological backlash must be taken into account.

The vision of the communist past, imposed by dominant neo-liberal forces during the 1990s, drew on trends apparent within East European dissent from the 1970s onwards. But they were now combined in a more systematic fashion, and in regard to the Prague Spring, this resulted in a threefold uncompromising verdict. The defeat of the reformists was seen as the final proof of an inherent unreformability of communist regimes. Apart from empirical objections to this view, to be discussed below, there is a basic reason for doubt: can any social regime be unamenable to reform of any kind? It is an established fact that no reforms in the history of communism fulfilled their promises, but this does not mean that nothing was ever reformed. A second claim, closely related to the first, was that unorthodox Marxist critiques of the Soviet model, of the kind adumbrated by many revisionist intellectuals between 1956 and 1968, had been invalidated *en bloc* and should give way to opposition on fundamentally different grounds. There is

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no doubt that the origins of this turn were linked to more general disillusionment with Marxian modes of thought during the 1970s. But it is one thing to move beyond Marxism (and the validity of that move is not being questioned), another to dismiss that whole tradition as unworthy of further engagement and suppress its insights. Finally, the idea of a critical attitude to both Cold War alternatives, Eastern and Western, was dismissed as an illusory third way, and replaced by an obvious choice between a successful and a failed model.

In short, the quasi-official view of the Prague Spring closed the book on questions and claimed to rest on uncontroversial facts. The first task of critical reflection is therefore to reinstate the imperative of questioning conventional wisdom.

Crisis, reform and defeat

If the first step towards the invention of the Soviet model was taken in 1917, 1989 saw the beginning of the multiple mutations that put an end to its trajectory. Stalin's death in 1953 divides the time in between into two periods of exactly the same length. The exit from history and especially the rapid collapse in Eastern Europe have—understandably—generated a certain tendency to treat the second period as nothing but a downhill road, paved by more or less serious reformist intentions. The story is of course more complicated. To cut it short, developments between 1953 and 1989 may be described as a changing combination of several processes. The beginning was an unavoidable restructuring after the demise of an autocrat who had become the central institution of his regime. More public and more conflictual later developments overshadowed this initial episode (the changes and power struggles between 1953 and 1956), but it was a crucial prelude to further movement. The shift from an autocratic and massively terroristic version of totalitarianism to an oligarchic and more controlledly repressive one was not a negligible detail. But it called for a more explicit redefinition of the regime's past history and future aims, as well as of its present relations to the capitalist environment (the problem that proved most intractable was the growing presence of another communist great power).

It was not foreordained that this reorientation would take the form that it did through the twentieth party congress in 1956. The de-sacralisation of Stalin sparked a protracted legitimation crisis, which in turn called for damage-limiting and reconsolidating measures. At the same time, attempts were made to push ideological and political change beyond the limits imposed by the Soviet power centre. This was especially pronounced in the East Central European periphery of the Soviet bloc (for a very informative discussion of the background to these developments, see Kolář [2016a]). But there were major differences between the countries in question. While the ruling party in Poland rode out the storm through a settlement that is now—because of later difficulties—not held in high

esteem, but was at the time a significant departure from established patterns, the crisis in Hungary became so explosive that the regime collapsed before reformist policies could be implemented, and some steps in that direction were only taken later, when there was no scope for a reform movement. The Czechoslovak pattern differed from both these cases. Nothing momentous happened in 1956, but as Muriel Blaive [2005] shows in her detailed study of that year in Czechoslovakia, the calm was less untroubled than commonly assumed. A stronger reformist current took shape from the early 1960s onwards, and led to major changes in party leadership and policies at the beginning of 1968. All conjectures about the longer-term perspectives of the Czechoslovak reform project are unavoidably speculative, but the present writer tends to agree with H. Gordon Skilling's diagnosis of an 'interrupted revolution' (Skilling [1976], still the most detailed analysis developed by any Western historian). In other words, it seems likely that the radicalising process would have continued, if it had not been halted by the invasion in August 1968. The claim that the reforms had reached their limits, or met with ultimate systemic obstacles, is if anything more speculative. A closer look at the events of 1968 suggests that the outcome was decided by the geopolitical constitution of the Soviet bloc, i.e. the incompatibility of autonomous reforms on the periphery with the hegemony of the centre, not by any uniform systemic logic. And it may be added that a geopolitical constellation was also a key factor in the momentous reorientation of the centre in the late 1980s. The Soviet Union could no longer sustain two cold wars (with China and the West), with the proven possibility of open war erupting on both fronts, a growing collusion of the two adversaries, and a particularly acute local conflict related to the threats from both sides (Afghanistan).

1968 as a global constellation

After this brief look at the historical background, the next aspect to be considered is the contemporary context, and more specifically the relationship between the Czechoslovak reform movement and the protest movements that shaped the image of 1968 in the West. There are two sides to this question. On the one hand, the mutual disdain of the movements is notorious. Western radicals were consistently dismissive of Czechoslovak reformists, before and after August 1968, and fundamental scepticism was the dominant Czechoslovak response to student activism west of the border (more scathing comments came later, notably from Milan Kundera). Exceptions can be found on both sides, but they did not change the mainstream leftist views. On the other hand, the intellectual currents of the Prague Spring were in many ways related to trends in the West, and some Czechoslovak contributions to international debates reached a broader public through translations. The two books most noticed were Karel Kosík's *Dialectics of the Concrete* [1976 (1963)] and *Civilization at the Crossroads,* a collection of papers on the scientific and technological revolution by Radovan Richta and his collaborators

[Richta et al. 1969]. These two works exemplify the diversity of approaches that emerged within the Czechoslovak context. But as Pavel Kolář [2016b] argues in a recent paper, further exploration of affinities and parallels with Western developments is needed.

At the time, little was done to clarify such international connections. But a very interesting attempt, much less known than it deserves to be, can be found in a short text by Jan Patočka. The Czech title, 'Inteligence a opozice' [Patočka 2006], raises translation problems: the first word can refer to intelligence as a human capacity, to the intelligentsia as a socio-cultural stratum with specific historical characteristics, and to intellectuals as a social group in a more general sense. It seems clear that Patočka had all three meanings in mind. The first version of the text was presented as a lecture in Germany in the late spring of 1968; the longer Czech version seems to have been completed shortly before August 1968, but was not published (in a collection of Patočka's essays) until the spring of 1969, and was then almost immediately withdrawn from circulation. Patočka's aim was to make sense of the contestatory movements animated by intellectuals in general and students in particular. He accepted the idea that a scientific and technological revolution was changing the situation and outlook of the intelligentsia in modern societies, but did not assume that this predetermined a course of action or a view of the world. Rather, he set out to measure the distance between possibilities opened up by the new constellation, and this perspective linked the Czechoslovak experience not only to Western movements, but also to the Chinese cultural revolution. At one end of the spectrum, the mass character of the newly emerging educated strata made them manipulable by upstart or established leaders (this was the alternative exemplified by Mao Zedong's mobilisation of students). The other extreme, seen as an adequate but not easily achievable response to the advanced modern predicament, is an intellectual transformation that would overcome—or at least tone down—a distinction that Patočka had previously stressed and was to reaffirm later: the difference between the intellectual and the 'spiritual human being' (*duchovní člověk*). At issue is the question of transcendence, more precisely the double transcendence which Patočka sees as a defining anthropological feature. He distinguishes between vertical transcendence towards the world as an ultimate horizon of meaning and horizontal transcendence as an enabling precondition of change in human affairs. The former encompasses 'the "philosophical" and the "moral realm" as the irreal through which transcendence permeates the world' [ibid.: 248; translation J.A.]; the latter can lead to visions of revolutionary alternatives. It should be noted that this conception of transcendence is not committed to religious premises, but sets no a priori limits to a dialogue with religion, and allows for the intertwining of vertical and horizontal transcendence. Patočka expresses sympathy for the Marxists (not least the Czechoslovak ones) who set out to rediscover the anthropological dimension, but criticises them for not grasping the crucial fact of double transcendence. He underlines the point with a brief comment on Hegel and Marx: for him, Marx does not represent an

irreversible progress beyond Hegel, and Hegel is not a source to be reactivated as an alternative or a corrective to Marxism. Rather, the two thinkers—taken together—exemplify an impasse of modern thought: Hegel's subordination of the human world to the logic of spirit was a way of absolutising vertical transcendence, and Marx's unilateral emphasis on human self-creation and self-liberation presupposed a self-contained horizontal transcendence.

Memories and influences

At this point, and in view of guidelines for contributors to this symposium, a few words should be said about the importance of the Prague Spring for the present writer. Being there and observing the progress of the reform movement in the 1960s was of course an invaluable sociological education. But on the more specific disciplinary level, the sociological connection was not the most direct one. During my years in Prague, I studied philosophy and history, and although I followed the rebirth of sociology in the 1960s with interest, it was not my main concern. The primary reference was philosophical. But although I now regard Jan Patočka as the greatest Czech thinker and his work as the most important Czech contribution to the understanding of modernity and its divergent pathways, that was not yet my view when I left Czechoslovakia. I had barely begun to explore Patočka's writings. The crucial influence was Karel Kosík's comprehensive reinterpretation of Marxism. It is still debated whether it owed more to phenomenological or Hegelian affiliations. My view is that the phenomenological ones were more important, and that was certainly how I read *Dialectics of the Concrete* at the time (of course, the phenomenological connection had more than a little to do with Patočka, but that was less clear to me then).

Kosík certainly did not think of himself as a sociologist, and has not been read as such. My research interests and projects moved closer to sociology during the stay in Frankfurt, and the neo-Marxism evident in publications from the early to mid-1970s reflects influences from that quarter, although the link to the Prague background was never lost. But there was a further twist. In the second half of the 1970s, I engaged more intensively with the sociological classics, especially Durkheim and Weber, and this led to a more fundamental critique of Marx and the tradition—or more precisely the complex of traditions—taking off from him. It now seems clear to me (although it was not so obvious at the time) that my broadly phenomenological reading of the texts in question was significantly inspired by Kosík's way of reading Marx. This became for me the most important bridge between philosophy and sociology.

More direct contact with Czech sociology came later. Conversations with Zdeněk Strmiska during my sabbaticals in Paris, and with Jaroslav Krejčí, Pavel Machonin, Jiří Musil, and Miloslav Petrusek in Prague, after my return from Australia to Europe, were particularly instructive. All these scholars had spent the

1960s in Prague and had much to say about that period. There was also a historical legacy to be rediscovered. The first Czechoslovak Republic had developed a vigorous sociological tradition (and its two heads of state were sociologists). In 1967–1968, Czechoslovak sociologists were well on their way to reviving that ancestry. As for the specific agenda of civilisational analysis, understood as a branch of historical sociology with its own philosophical connections, two initiatives coming from Prague should be noted, even if they emerged outside the mainstream of sociological revival. In both cases, but in very different ways, they drew on interrelated critical readings of Arnold Toynbee and Max Weber. Jan Patočka had already taken that path in an unfinished text, probably from the late 1950s, and to the best of my knowledge the first attempt to theorise modernity as a new type of civilisation. It was, among other things, a response to the increasingly visible problems of the alternative modernity represented by communism. In the 1960s, Jaroslav Krejčí began to develop a more comprehensive programme for comparative civilisational analysis, which he continued in exile. He saw that approach as the most promising key to Czechoslovak experiences in the 20th century.

All the above-mentioned authors and ideas were significant sources for the department of historical sociology at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague, with which I have cooperated since its foundation in 2008. The sociological anchorage is important for us, but so are the historical problems posed—in particular—by the 20th-century paroxysm of modernity.

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