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## The Prague Spring and the Illusion of Transformational Politics

In Memory of Fred Eidlin

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The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia burst into American politics in the most dramatic way. During a widely viewed hearing of the platform committee of the Democratic Party on 22 August 1968, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, who was testifying in support of the policy of the administration in Vietnam, was informed of the invasion on screen, and rushed to leave the room. I watched this while it occurred. Americans were promptly evacuated from Czechoslovakia [Eidlin 1980: vi]. It was a harsh and shocking reminder of the realities of geopolitics at a time of misbeliefs. The reminders continued: this too was a generational experience. Fred Eidlin, a political scientist whom I only came to know later, was on one of the trains that left. He later returned, only to be arrested, imprisoned, and made an example of on Czech television, before being released.

The year 1968 was already a year of protest, of course in France, with the student revolt, but in many other places. The object of the revolt was obscure. There were direct targets, particularly the war in Vietnam. But other issues, such as university reform, were priorities. And the student movement itself appeared as a historical example of generational conflict, as the contemporary book by Lewis Feuer argued at great length [1969].

The Prague Spring and Alexander Dubček played a particular role in sustaining certain illusions of the time, while the invasion played a role in eliminating others. If there was anything close to a coherent ideology of the student movement and the protests of 1968 in the West, it was 'socialist humanism'. This was a theoretical programme, with a distinguished and highly visible set of protagonists, such as the Marxist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, both products of the Frankfurt School. But some of its most lively expressions were to be found in the Warsaw Pact countries and Yugoslavia. In Prague, Milan Průcha and Karel Kosík were prominent representatives: both were contributors to Fromm's important collection, *Socialist Humanism* [1966]. Fromm also had con-

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tact with Milan Machovec, who played a prominent role in introducing the idea of a Christian-Marxist dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

Socialist Humanism was premised on a view of Marxism that originated in the idea of going beyond what later came to be called 'real existing socialism'. The guiding idea was that humanism by itself was not enough, and that socialism in the material sense was also not enough, but that something new and better, a new and better humanism, could be built on the achievements of socialism, and that there needed to be what some of the commentators called a spiritual element to this new order. This element was not the old humanism, which was infected with bourgeois ideology or something even more retrograde, but a humanism appropriate for people liberated from bourgeois oppression.

Ernst Bloch explained true human emancipation in this way: 'our fellow men will no longer be, as in the egoistic, Bourgeois phase of the Rights of Man, checks and hindrances upon our freedom, but all men will live together in a community of freedom' [Bloch 1966: 227]. This was the phase which these countries were taken to be on the verge of achieving. The phrase 'community of freedom' nicely captures its twin goals: freedom from repression and mutual solidarity.

It was widely believed in the West that the thinkers—mostly philosophers—of Soviet bloc countries had a kind of special access to an understanding of this future humanism. Fromm was especially entranced and motivated by this idea [Friedman 2013: 238]. They had been purged, at least externally, of bourgeois oppression, so *their* talk of freedom meant something different than bourgeois talk about freedom, or even the talk of the emancipation of people still under a bourgeois order.

The Prague Spring, and Dubček himself, appeared, in the light of this general story line, not so much as a sign of the fragility and ultimate failure of the system of Soviet rule or the communist project, but as a confirmation of the basic story: 'socialism' could be freed of its repressive aspects, its authoritarian trappings, its cults of personality, and so forth. These aspects were confirmed, by Dubček's actions and the response to them in Czechoslovakia, to be merely accidental features of 'real existing socialism'. The events were, in a broader sense, a confirmation of the basic idea of socialist humanism. Eliminate the repressive apparatus and a community of freedom would follow. Dubček was not seen as responding to internal pressures generated by the rule of the Communist Party or the oppressive apparatus of the state. He was seen as taking the path that socialist humanism had prophesied. The slogan 'Socialism with a Human Face' was the perfect articulation of the idea of socialist humanism.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Moltmann, who provides an account of the meetings that preceded the Prague Spring and a glimpse of the character of Machovec as well as of the divisions between thinkers who were part of the movement and those associated with authoritarian communism [Moltmann 2009: 119–128].

## **The illusory image of Soviet Europe**

The idea that true emancipation was immanent in these societies fit with the central belief of many leftist Western commentators about actually existing socialism: that the core intentions and goals of Marxism and its critique of 'bourgeois society' were correct, and that all that had gone wrong was their practical application in Russia, and that its mistakes, or justifiable reactions, were the product, entirely or largely, of capitalist resistance and antagonism. It was this antagonism, by this logic, that was the real evil in modern society, and the United States was the chief source of this antagonism and therefore the chief obstacle to progress.

This had become enlightened opinion by 1968. 'Conservatives' in the United States had kept alive the idea of 'captive nations'. These nations were listed on a large billboard across from the United Nations building in New York, to the ridicule of their more sophisticated contemporaries. For them, John Foster Dulles, who departed before the 1960s, was seen as a relic and a warmonger, though he had been all talk and no action about Eastern Europe. Complaints about Soviet hegemony were seen as an obstacle to world peace and a continuation of the worst impulses of the Cold War. Intellectuals, especially, proclaimed their faith in 'convergence'. Eastern Europe was to be taken as a model of enlightened Soviet protection, suffering only as a result of the general problem of Western hostility. It was even treated as a source of inspiration prior to the Prague Spring. The fact that Radio Free Europe had an avid following of listeners to its Jazz programmes was taken as a sign of the underlying fraternity between enlightened Westerners and Eastern Europeans, and as a sign also that things were not so bad, or backward, in these countries.

The convenient implication of this reasoning was that the actualities of the Soviet Union could be ignored, and the theory of human emancipation through socialism saved. This had an important consequence for the attitude of the Western Left to Eastern Europe—a category in which Czechoslovakia was put, however unwillingly and ungeographically. The experiences of Eastern Europe under Soviet hegemony and as part of the Warsaw Pact were deprived of meaning. To be sure, in 1956 the Hungarian uprising and Khrushchev's speech on Stalin had caused many intellectuals who were party members to resign. But this did not change their basic political orientation, or their faith in the realisation of a community of freedom through socialism. By 1968 only an older generation had any memory of the Hungarian uprising, and to mention it marked one out as a political primitive, allied to Cold War Manicheanism.

The Soviet invasion dispelled the illusion that Soviet actualities could be forgiven, precisely because the invasion had no excuse: Dubček was a loyal communist; there was no 'threat to socialism' to be eliminated, no good intentions hidden behind the invasion, no higher purpose for the cause of socialism. There was no good storyline to justify it, in part because, as Fred Eidlin argued, there was no coherent process of decision that led to it [1980]. It was a more or less

mindless reaction against a threat to the status quo. But it revealed fear—fear of the benign development that socialist humanism envisioned and which the Prague Spring embodied.

### **What does the Prague Spring mean today?**

Among the events of 1968, the Prague Spring and the repression that followed stand out. Unlike the student movements, this was not merely a protest: it was a collective political experience of the whole society, led by the state itself. It was an attempt to realise a new, humane order, a community of freedom, derived from the philosophy of Marx, Hegel, and the existentialists, perhaps—an idea that played a special role in Prague—with a spiritual element derived from Christianity. This is what Milan Průcha saw in these sources: a shared understanding of alienation. The future community was to be alienation-free: ‘by the creation of a new kind of social relationship, etc., the individual can gain new possibilities for liberating himself from his egocentric isolation and for participating in the being of all mankind’ [Průcha 1966: 161].

The Soviet invasion, by cutting the Prague project off, inadvertently preserved the idea that a new order, genuinely humane and free of repression, could be created by a collective act of what Durkheim called fusion, in which the collective consciousness and therefore the conditions of human relations are transformed. Because there was no aftermath in which practical matters of human relations needed to be worked out, there was no failure. There was merely the external and accidental fact of the Soviet invasion.

The idea of radical change through collective fusion was given a kind of confirmation a year later, almost to the day, by the ‘three days of peace and music’ of the Woodstock festival. This event was taken to be a sign that, left to their own devices and free of the repressive apparatus of the state and of traditional sexual mores, a new form of community could be created, without a plan, without rulers, without violence, and without coercion. The same idea is repeated in many variations elsewhere. The possibility of such a transformation defines much of the contemporary American and French discussion of ‘the political’ and ‘democracy’ [cf. Wolin 1996: 31; Wolin 1994: 11; Xenos 2001: 31–32; Brown 2001: 4–5]. Jacques Rancière summarises the appropriation of this idea by political theory:

Genuine participation is the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street, the invention of a movement born of nothing but democracy itself. The guarantee of permanent democracy is not the filling up of all the dead times and empty spaces by the forms of participation or of counterpower; it is the continual renewal of the actors and of the forms of their actions, the ever-open possibility of the fresh emergence of this fleeting subject. The test of democracy must ever be in democracy’s own image: versatile, sporadic—and founded on trust. [Rancière 2007 (1992): 60–61].

‘Genuine participation’ is an echo of Bloch’s ‘genuine community’. Political structures merely stand in its way. The transformative moment of collective emotion is genuine democracy; having the possibility of the emergence of this collective subject ‘ever-present’ is the test of democracy.

In retrospect, the writings of the socialist humanists were distinguished by one striking feature: the absence of any analysis of actual politics. The language of dis-alienation and emancipation pointed to a glimmering ideal that transcended the grubby realities of political community, authority, law, and the limits to the possibility of human transformation. Similarly, what we might call ‘the Woodstock theory of democracy’, promoted by thinkers like Sheldon Wolin, regards actual political structures as impediments to genuine democracy rather than necessary instruments for its realisation.

These two groups of thinkers thus share a certain blindness, which the after-effects of the Soviet invasion revealed. It is a feature of the East-West divide that in the West the effects following the shock of the invasion were psychic, while in the East they were concrete. In the West there was disappointment. The fate of the Czech socialist humanists was imprisonment, exile, early death, or dismissal. This was tangible, actual repression. The leading figures who promulgated the basic story outlined above lived freely and profited handsomely in America or West Germany. This was a difference that did not fit the basic story: bourgeois repression was supposed to be the most fundamental form of repression.

While the Soviet invasion inadvertently preserved the illusion of the possibility of radical collective transformation, it destroyed the ideas of convergence and of the immanent development of genuine community in the societies freed of bourgeois repression. It destroyed the illusion that the experience of freedom from bourgeois repression conferred some sort of higher wisdom: thinkers like Adam Schaff [1966], who was lionised during this period, were befuddled by what came after. Schaff himself opposed the Solidarity movement in Poland. The Woodstock theory of democracy is a replacement of the ideals of socialist humanism, and a tacit admission of their lack of inevitability. It is a version instead of the Sorelian idea of transformation, in which the means are known, but the destination is not. This was not what the socialist humanists or the participants in the Prague Spring thought they were promoting. But it is what was left for the children of socialist humanism to believe in when the ‘real existing socialist’ regimes failed to reform, and after most of them ceased to exist.

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