

## A Crusade for Social Anthropology: An Analysis of Politics in Post-Socialist Debates\*

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**Abstract:** This article aims to apply critical scrutiny to post-socialist discourse, an ongoing series of debates concerning the relationship between sociocultural anthropology and ethnology in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). To achieve my goal, I single out Petr Skalník's writings and subject them to twofold scrutiny. In the first part of my article, I offer factual criticism and point out the factual shortcomings of his work. The second part of the article puts the writings under sociological scrutiny, based on what I call a 'political reading', and proceeding from the sociology of science of Pierre Bourdieu. This perspective shows how scholars' concrete utterances in their factual accounts are related to power struggles within the scholarly community. This approach demonstrates how Skalník's concrete factual misrepresentations intrinsically relate to his objective of establishing sociocultural anthropology in post-socialist Czechia and the associated struggles between Czech anthropologists and ethnologists. The present analysis, by extension, allows us to better understand the post-socialist transformation of CEE academia and casts doubt on the veracity of post-socialist discourse itself.

**Keywords:** post-socialism, academic politics, European ethnology, sociocultural anthropology, sociology of science

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## Introduction

This paper aims to apply critical scrutiny to what I call ‘post-socialist discourse’ – namely, an ongoing series of discussions addressing the relationship between two scholarly traditions: Western sociocultural anthropology and the ethnology of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). I trace the origins of the discourse to the 1990s, although attempts to capture the relations between the two traditions did not, of course, originate at this time. Much earlier, we find scholars commenting on the differences between the two (Bromley, 1980; Hofer, 1968; Hynková, 1972; Lass, 1989; Skalníková & Fojtík, 1969; Stocking, 1982). However, since the fall of the Eastern Bloc, a sense of escalated relations between the two traditions has emerged. The post-revolutionary context opened a space not only for political and economic transformations but also for changes in research and higher education. Sociocultural anthropology, though not entirely unknown in the region before, began to challenge the established division of scholarly labour in CEE and partly claimed the space occupied by ethnology. Thus, post-socialist discourse can be read as a testimony to the mutual struggles between the two traditions in the post-socialist context. This discourse has several national segments where scholars debate in local vernaculars. These segments reflect the national specifics of the struggles. It also includes an overarching segment using English as its *lingua franca*, which overlaps at times with the national segments. Especially since the 2000s, contributions have grown rapidly, and discussions have ramified unpredictably. After more than three decades of incessant debating, finding one’s footing in the complicated web of accounts is almost impossible.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of my critical scrutiny, I single out Petr Skalník’s contributions to post-socialist discourse. Beginning in the early 1990s, Skalník established himself as a prominent champion of anthropology in CEE and Czechia and became a household name of post-socialist discourse. Measuring his devotion to the cause of anthropology by the number of published texts, we note that Skalník markedly surpasses other Czech contributors to the debates. Between 2002 and 2022, he produced or co-authored more than one text on the topic every two years.<sup>2</sup> His writings resonated deeply with the experiences of other champions of anthropology in CEE. Thanks to his fluency in English and high productivity, Skalník features as almost the sole representative of Czechia in the English-speaking segment and as a recognised spokesperson for Czech ethnology and anthropology in the wider international community.

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<sup>1</sup> The amount of literature has grown substantially since the 1990s. I refer to only a selection of contributions, among which several are edited volumes (Bošković & Hann, 2013; Dracklé et al., 2003; Hann et al., 2005b; Holubová et al., 2002; Skalník, 2002a) and articles (Brković, 2018; Buchowski, 2004, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Čapo, 2014; Ciubrinskas, 2015; Hann, 2009; Martínez, 2020; Sárkány, 2002; Scheffel & Kandert, 1994; Skovajsa, 2008; Testa, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> This work amounts to thirteen texts in total (Hann et al., 2005a; 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2012, 2018a, 2018b, 2020).

I approach my critical scrutiny from two perspectives – factual and sociological. The factual criticism stems from the deeply felt obligation to rectify factual errors in Skalník's writings. Errors represent an unfortunate, though integral, part of any accomplished scholarship. Naturally, Skalník's texts are no exception. Therefore, this article focuses on the misleading and incorrect claims found in Skalník's texts. Factual criticism is especially important given Skalník's prominence.

Nevertheless, I believe Skalník's factual errors result from his distinctive partisan positioning in Czech academia, which may not always be apparent to the reader. Thus, my other line of enquiry dissects Skalník's writings using what I call a 'political reading'. This perspective is grounded in the sociology of science developed by Pierre Bourdieu, a framework which I will introduce in more detail later in the article. Bourdieusian sociology adopts a distinct reflexivity towards works of scholarly nature, viewing them not only as offering factual, interpretive, or explanatory accounts but also as instruments in the power struggles in academia. The language that these works employ can be approached as a political oratory. The goal is to persuade or discourage, mobilise readers, provoke action, establish a norm, win individuals over, or denigrate opponents. The term 'political' touches on the political dimension of life within academia, manifesting in the struggles for disciplinary autonomy, funding, recognition, jobs, or students. My political reading is not merely a matter of the chosen sociological perspective: reading Skalník, we find that political concerns are strongly present in his writings.

Thus, while the first part of my article approaches Skalník's writings at face value, the second part approaches them with a pinch of salt and attempts to show how his individual statements, irrespective of their documentable verisimilitude, can be interpreted as tools in the struggles over the institutionalisation of sociocultural anthropology in post-socialist Czechia. The second part is divided into three sections. The first introduces the Bourdieusian perspective. The second outlines the specific context in which I situate Skalník, a necessary precondition for the political reading of his factual statements. In the third section, I intend to show how he used specific statements as a means to legitimise anthropology and delegitimise ethnology in the struggles between anthropologists and ethnologists.

This article touches on two questions of general importance. First, it follows the historical sociology of science in trying to explain the success or failure of research projects or scientific paradigms, academic disciplines, and individual scholars (Johnston, 1986; Steinmetz, 2010). The outcome of Skalník's project, I believe, has wider implications for understanding the post-socialist transformation of Czech academia. Second, this article discusses the status of the post-socialist discourse to which Skalník's texts contribute. The essential question to ask is whether politics has not infused the post-socialist discourse to the extent that the factual accounts which make up the discourse are too distorted to be used as reliable sources.

## A preliminary understanding

To understand the motives guiding Skalník's pen, it is necessary to provide a preliminary understanding of his texts. Skalník identifies a single Czechoslovak (and later Czech and Slovak) disciplinary tradition, which he varyingly calls *národopis*, ethnography, and ethnology. Each name was preferred in a different era and reflected distinct historical circumstances. The term *národopis* originated in the nineteenth century, while 'ethnography' was introduced after 1948; 'ethnology' began to be used after 1989. However, all three refer to a single discipline, the continuity of which was not severed by the political upheavals of the twentieth century. Neither the two World Wars, the communist takeover in 1948, the Prague Spring twenty years later, the Velvet Revolution in 1989, nor the dissolution of Czechoslovakia substantially affected the discipline's continuity. This continuity allows Skalník to emphasise the unchanging specifics of the discipline. He views the tradition of *národopis* / ethnography / ethnology as methodologically and theoretically obsolete, partly due to its nineteenth-century positivist, historicist, and nationalist bedrock and partly due to state socialism and its Marxist–Leninist ideology, which flowed into the discipline in the second half of the twentieth century (Skalník, 2005b, p. 13).

Due to its obsolescence, Skalník calls for the discipline's 'anthropologisation' (Skalník, 2002d, p. 104). In the title of a short article published later, Skalník (2005b) asks whether we can create anthropology out of *národopis*. If the latter scholarly tradition is to ever survive as a respectable discipline in the contemporary world, it must innovate by adopting methods and theories from sociocultural anthropology. As Skalník expressed elsewhere, his preference lies in social anthropology (Hann et al., 2007, p. 36; Skalník, 2007). His stance is phrased in a spirit as uncompromising as that of F. W. Maitland: contemporary Czech ethnology must choose between becoming anthropology or becoming nothing (Evans-Pritchard, 1950, p. 123).

In a different article, Skalník (2004) complains that the 'Malinowskian revolution' in ethnology could not be completed (p. 287). Ethnologists are presented as the main villains hindering its realisation. Skalník (2004) contends that a successful establishment of anthropology would definitely expose their incompetence and discredit them as scholars (p. 290). He once remarked that 'ethnography is to anthropology what alchemy is to chemistry' (1999) or that 'social anthropology with its revolutionary theory and method causes havoc' in ethnologists' ranks' (Hann et al., 2007, p. 38; Skalník, 2007, p. 190).

Skalník's diatribes against Czech ethnology naturally lead us to enquire into his deeper motivations. Why does he feel compelled to criticise ethnology from an anthropological standpoint? Where does the need to anthropologise it come from? Are anthropology and ethnology not two separate disciplines pursuing different objectives? Should Skalník not offer suggestions to improve anthropology rather than criticise Czech ethnology? It seems as if, according to Skalník,

the quality of Czech anthropology somewhat depended on Czech ethnology. Let us, however, postpone these questions until later and focus on factual criticism first.

### Factual criticism

For the purposes of factual criticism, it would be convenient to begin with Skalník's two most recent contributions: an encyclopaedia entry and a journal article, the latter of which is a partly updated version of the former (Skalník, 2018b, 2020). The encyclopaedia entry titled 'The Anthropology in Post-Socialist Europe' promises an Olympian undertaking covering anthropology's post-socialist predicament in twenty-two countries, from East Germany in the West to Russia in the East and from Estonia in the North to Albania in the South. Several of Skalník's statements rest on his knowledge of the local situation, but it becomes evident that he set an impossible task for himself. Indeed, the entry almost solely covers the situation in Czechoslovakia and Czechia, which Skalník uses to represent the hardships of anthropology in the entire region – a dubitable means to an impossible goal. I do not pretend to be acquainted with the state of anthropology in all the countries relevant to Skalník's entry. Such an amount of knowledge is, without exaggeration, unattainable in a single lifetime. Therefore, my criticism touches only on his writings on the history of the Czech and Czechoslovak disciplines.

Skalník (2018b) claims that there are four common denominators which explain the predicament of anthropology in CEE. First, 'anthropology' has been understood as biological anthropology, a natural science study of human beings. Second, local academia has been decisively influenced by the German academic tradition. Third, the region has been influenced by nationalism, which encourages scholars to focus on studying their own nation at the expense of studying other ethnic and national entities. Fourth, the region has been heavily influenced by communist hegemony and Marxist–Leninist ideology.<sup>3</sup> While each point holds some merit, I do not believe that the influence of German academic tradition and mistaking *sociocultural* anthropology for *biological* anthropology significantly impacted the discipline's predicament. Given the constraints of space and the fact that Skalník elaborates on the first two points rather poorly, I will focus only on the remaining two points: the influence of nationalism and Marxism–Leninism. Regarding the latter, it needs to be emphasised that although Skalník sometimes speaks of communist rule, he usually reduces it to the influence of Marxism–

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<sup>3</sup> There is a certain ambiguity in Skalník's denominators. When he elaborates on the first point, he does not speak of biological anthropology but suddenly introduces 'anthropology's schizophrenic character' in the region. Skalník's (2018b) elaboration on this schizophrenic character fits the influence of nationalism (p. 2). Moreover, when Skalník moves from the third to the fourth point, he begins to speak, without prior explanation, about ethnography. This suggests that anthropology is in some way connected to ethnography.

Leninism on the epistemic content of science. His texts do not elaborate on other facets of communist rule, such as the planned economy, political purges, institutional reorganisations, or the presence of the Communist Party, apart from a rather common-sense understanding of the Czechoslovak socialist regime as oppressive.

Speaking of nationalism and Marxism–Leninism, Skalník strongly asserts that both influenced the mindset of local scholars, with consequences for the subject matter, methodology, and theory. Regarding the former, Skalník portrays CEE ethnographies as inheritors of the nation-building of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, therefore, as exclusively preoccupied with the study of their own nations, excluding other national and ethnic minorities as legitimate subjects of ethnographic enquiry: '[t]he contents [of the discipline] are decisive and have primarily been the self-celebratory study of one's own nation' (Skalník, 2018b, p. 4). He contrasts these disciplinary traditions with the traditions that study peoples *in the plural* and originated in colonial empires. He adds that anthropology 'was looked upon with awe, suspicion, and rejection under communist rule' (Skalník, 2018b, p. 4). Although Skalník strangely and out of the blue connects the 'rejected anthropology' with communist rule and not with nationalism, as one would expect, the whole section is phrased as if the emergence of anthropology has been hampered due to a narrow-minded nationalism surviving among ethnologists to this day.<sup>4</sup>

The bulk of ethnographic oeuvres supports Skalník's contention about the 'primary content' and the self-celebratory study of one's own nation; however, this contention obscures the fact that Czechoslovak ethnographers also extensively studied non-Czech communities, as evidenced by the multitude of such works. The most common was the study of groups which settled in the borderlands following the expulsion of Germans after WWII. This included not only Czech and Slovak repatriates from Romania, Ukraine, Poland, or Bulgaria but also Greeks and Ukrainians (Heroldová, 1986; Kašpar, 1986; Matějová, 1982). In addition, research on the Roma, Cubans, and Vietnamese was also conducted (Haišman, 1989; Heroldová & Matějová, 1987; Secká, 1987). The 1980s saw the rise of research on Pacific and Asian ethnopharmacology (Šita, Silná, et al., 1986; Šita, Škvařil, et al., 1986). Several ethnographers studied the coexistence of non-Czech groups with the Czech majority and dared to look for variables influencing the rate of assimilation (Heroldová, 1984, 1985; Secká, 1988). The research on ethnic

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<sup>4</sup> Skalník omits the popularity of travelogues and young adult fiction from the Wild West. These genres have been very popular among the Czech public since the nineteenth century and motivated many adolescents to study ethnography and ethnology. His statement similarly avoids the fact that in spite of nationalism, there have been strong disciplinary traditions of African, Amerindian, and Oriental studies, with their representatives contributing to *Československá ethnografie*, a prominent ethnography journal published between 1953 and 1962.

groups carried out in the 1970s and 1980s was inspired by Yulian Bromley's theory of ethnos and supported by the publication of a translation of Bromley's book *Ethnos and Ethnography* (Bromley 1973/1980). For no evident reason, Skalník (2018b) denies the comparative dimension of research on ethnic groups, claiming that comparative Soviet ethnography was only 'superficially followed' (p. 4).

Moving on to Marxism–Leninism, Skalník (2018b) claims that '[t]he power monopoly of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia imposed Marxism–Leninism and historical materialism as the only framework for scientific discourse' (p. 6) or that communist rule 'made ethnography an auxiliary branch of knowledge the goal of which was to supply suitable data to the theory of Marxist historical materialism' (p. 4). Apart from theoretical content, Skalník (2018b) additionally mentions an ideology-induced change in the subject matter which occurred after 1948: 'a change from the study of national (mostly peasant) culture to the study of working people, poor farmers and their folk culture, miners, and other industrial proletarians' (p. 4).

Skalník's statements, unaccompanied by any analysis whatsoever, open up a space for further questioning. I would especially like to focus on six themes touched upon in Skalník's texts: (1) the relation between Marxism–Leninism and nationalism in ethnography; (2) the study of contemporary society in ethnography; (3) the relation between ethnography and anthropology; (4) the alleged hegemony of Marxism–Leninism in ethnography; (5) the legacy of Marxism–Leninism in contemporary ethnology; and (6) Skalník's use of disciplinary labels.

(1)

Skalník appears to be sustaining two incommensurable claims. As we have already seen, he attributes ethnographers the interest in studying their own nation and claims that this interest 'continued to dominate' after 1948 despite the introduction of Marxism–Leninism and Soviet ethnography (Skalník, 2018b, p. 4). However, he also mentions a change from the study of one's own nation to the study of proletarians. Therefore, were socialist-era ethnographers preoccupied with studying their own nation or with studying the proletariat? Surprisingly, Skalník is right on both points. This confusion stems from the poor analytical apparatus of his texts. Socialist-era ethnographers studied the working class, mostly various kinds of wage-earners, and its culture and adopted the Marxist–Leninist view on history as propelled by the class conflict. At the same time, however, ethnographers wrote texts about national history, presenting history as a process propelled by national struggles. Nonetheless, the relationship between the Marxist–Leninist and nationalist ideologies continues to present one of the most intriguing aspects related to communist rule and evinces remarkable variability across the countries of the Eastern Bloc (e.g. Górný, 2018; Grill, 2015; Holý, 1996; Křestán, 2012; Mervart & Růžička, 2020; Slezkine, 1994; Šnirelman, 1997; Verdery, 1991). Unfortunately, Skalník ignores this body of scholarship and does not show how exactly the co-existence of the two ideologies was made possible in Czechoslovak ethnography.

(2)

Skalník (2020) mistakenly claims that '[p]ractically no substantial study of contemporary "socialist" society was undertaken' (p. 124). Again, it is fair to produce the names of ethnographers concerned with research on contemporary socialist society. Outlines for such research were drawn by Olga Skalníková and Karel Fojtík (1969, 1971). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, ethnographers wrote about the socialist village, as this was one of their main specialisations (Frolec et al., 1984; Jiráček, 1982; Kadeřábková et al., 1981; Pargač, 1988; Robek & Svobodová, 1979; Švecová, 1975; Valášková, 1984). The claim regarding the absence of research on contemporary socialist society is all the more striking, given Skalník's emphasis on the ideological conditioning of ethnographic research. Ethnographers in leading positions declared that research on contemporary socialist society is ideologically important (Robek, 1979).

(3)

Within socialist-era ethnography, there was room for anthropology, which Skalník denies. In the spirit of fairness, it is appropriate to mention the matters which Skalník acknowledges. Beginning with the Stalinist period in 1948, the leading specialist on non-European societies, Josef Voráček, was ousted from the *Národopis* Department at Charles University (Petráňová, 2016), and several young Czechoslovak ethnographers of Marxist–Leninist persuasion took part in writing against American cultural and British social anthropology (Nahodil, 1950, 1951; Nahodil & Kramařík, 1951). A perfect example to emulate was the volume edited by Soviet ethnographer I. I. Potekhin (Potekhin, 1951/1953). It was translated into Czech in 1953 and brought together articles by leading Soviet ethnographers who pilloried American and British anthropologists for a variety of crimes, including racism, colonialism, and pornography. Yet, the title indicates a lack of denominational discrimination, which Skalník disregards. It does not refer to Anglo–American *anthropology* but to Anglo–American *ethnography*. Even though Soviet ethnographers and their Czechoslovak colleagues depicted American and British anthropology as inferior projects (for their lack of a Marxist–Leninist grounding), they did not portray anthropology as an alien discipline (Nahodil, 1953, pp. 7–9). For example, Czechoslovak ethnographers, under the influence of Engels, extolled L. H. Morgan, the pioneer of American anthropology (Nahodil, 1954) or even occasionally praised E. B. Tylor and L. Lévy-Bruhl, who were otherwise criticised for their idealism (Nahodil, 1957; Nahodil & Kramařík, 1951). Similarly, Hana Hynková (1972) later denied the existence of any differences between ethnography, ethnology, and social and cultural anthropology, as, according to her, all the labels refer to a single discipline (p. 195).

There are more clues which show that anthropology was neither wholly rejected nor always looked upon with suspicion, as Skalník claims. With the 1960s decolonisation underway and the heightened interest of the Eastern Bloc in the newly independent countries in Asia, Africa, and America, several Czechoslo-

vak ethnographers began to conduct fieldwork outside Europe (Bahenský, 2016; Woitsch, 2021). Ladislav Holý, having written a dissertation on kinship in East Africa from a Marxist–Leninist perspective, went to conduct fieldwork in Sudan. Milan Stuchlík undertook research in Chile, Jiřina Svobodová in Senegal, and Olga Skalníková visited Guinea. Even Holý's dissertation thesis made extensive use of works by British social anthropologists (Holý, 1963). Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, more ethnographers found inspiration in anthropology, although not all were lucky enough to conduct fieldwork outside Czechoslovakia (Holý, 1968; Scheufler, 1971; Skalníková & Fojtík, 1969, 1971; Wolf, 1971). In the early 1970s, Vladimír Scheufler collaborated with Zdeněk Salzman, a Czechoslovak-born American anthropologist, on a book on a Czech village (Salzman & Scheufler, 1974).

The popularity of anthropological inspiration culminated in the early 1970s, when the new political situation strongly disfavoured anthropology. However, the question is whether this phenomenon was motivated by personal animosities instead of epistemic rivalry. Nevertheless, knowledge of anthropology was never completely eradicated after the early 1970s. František Vrhel and his colleague Oldřich Kašpar, who were employed at the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies in Prague at the time, specialised in Latin America and produced works on the folklore and mythology of American indigenous groups (Kašpar & Vrhel, 1986, 1989; Vrhel, 1976; Vrhel & Kašpar, 1985). According to the former students with whom I spoke, Vrhel lectured on anthropology. He even wrote an appreciative article on American cognitive anthropology Vrhel (1985). Other ethnographers in Czechoslovakia knew and quoted anthropological literature, although they picked up themes which supported their conjectures related to folk culture (Frolec, 1984; Leščák & Sirovátka, 1982).

Skalník could effectively defend his stance by arguing that, until the 1990s, there was no independent Czechoslovak tradition of sociocultural anthropology or that ethnographers (save for a few exceptions in the 1960s) did not adhere to the Malinowskian standard of fieldwork. However, I believe that the absence of the Malinowskian standard was not caused by the methodological narrowmindedness of Czechoslovak ethnographers, as Skalník claims, but by a lack of financial sources that would sustain long-term fieldwork. Innumerable works have proven time and again that especially the original expansion of anthropology in the twentieth century was possible largely due to non-state funding schemes (Goody, 1995; Mills, 2008; Price, 2016; Stocking, 1995). No such scheme existed in Czechoslovakia, where ethnographers had to make a virtue out of necessity and conduct only short field trips.

Therefore, nothing warrants Skalník's categorical verdicts of the communist rule effectively suppressing anthropology. It is hard to agree with Skalník's (2020) words that sociocultural anthropology 'was seen as a direct competitor to Marxism and therefore suppressed' (p. 123). Moreover, and this is a point that should be stressed, all the individuals who began experimenting with anthropological-

style fieldwork shared institutions with colleagues who specialised in local ethnographic issues, such as pottery, folklore, or mining regions. For example, before she visited Guinea, Skalníková had been known as an expert in the ethnography of the working class (Skalníková et al., 1959). Svobodová would later specialise in the ethnography of the socialist village (Svobodová, 1973).

(4)

It is questionable whether all works of ethnographers and folklorists were subjected to Marxism–Leninism and nationalism to the same degree and whether there was no space for currents outside of these two intellectual frameworks. This is a complicated issue, which Skalník ignores altogether. For the sake of brevity, I chose a work which does not conform to the supposed hegemony of these ideologies: *Odeporicon*, a renaissance humanist travelogue by Johannes Butzbach from 1506. A translation of certain parts accompanied by the translator's notes and a critical study were conducted by Karel Dvořák, a folklorist working in the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies in Prague (Dvořák, 1975). Dvořák's accompanying text shows nationalist and Marxist–Leninist influences. He highlights some of Butzbach's narratives as anti-feudal, which accounts for Marxism–Leninism. Dvořák is also motivated by his disagreement with an earlier critical edition authored by German scholar Horst Preiss. Dvořák disagrees with Preiss' dismissive remarks on the backwardness of the Czech people, which attests to Dvořák's nationalist sentiments. Yet neither Marxism–Leninism nor nationalism prominently features in Dvořák's writings. He mostly employs philological and folklorist methods, which are distinct from both nationalist and Marxist–Leninist frameworks. We could go through other ethnographers' works one at a time, and we would find that not only do they profoundly differ in their emphasis on nationalism and Marxism–Leninism but also in their utilisation of other intellectual currents, which casts doubt on Skalník's claims of a prevailing Marxist–Leninist hegemony.

(5)

Skalník (2018b) claims that the 'legacy of Marxism in postcommunist European anthropology is significant to the present day. The Marxist terminology may be gone but the methods persist' (p. 5). The problem is that Skalník does not specify what Marxist–Leninist methods he believes persist and does not adduce any evidence. My reading of the post-socialist context is different from his. If we look at Czech ethnographers who began their careers during socialism and continued to work in the post-socialist era, we can perceive a wholesale abandonment of Marxism–Leninism and a strong adhesion to various idealist currents (see Krupková, 1991; Šalanda, 1997; Vrhel, 1993). Some notions akin to Marxism–Leninism continued to echo in ethnology. For example, ethnologists continued to base some of their explanations on general socioeconomic conditions or mentioned the middle class's emergence in the nineteenth century as an important feature of nation-building

(Stavělová, 2006). However, to describe such explanatory tools as Marxist–Leninist is to ignore that the same strategy is employed by many non-Marxist–Leninists as well. At the same time, Skalník is right when he claims that the nationalist framing continued to dominate ethnology, and I find Skalník’s dictum of the self-celebratory study of one’s own nation true even in post-socialist conditions – again with the only difference that ethnologists continued to study non-Czech groups as well (e.g. Brouček, 2016; Otčenášek, 1998).

(6)

To underscore the vigour with which Marxism–Leninism engulfed ethnography after 1948, Skalník mentions changes related to the name of the discipline. Skalník (2018b) writes that ‘the official names of departments were changed uniformly into *etnografie a folkloristika* [ethnography and folklore studies]’ (p. 6, emphasis in original).

Skalník is right that young Czechoslovak ethnographers doted on Soviet ethnography and perceived it as the unrivalled ideal, hence adopting the label ‘ethnography’ (see Kramařík, 1953; Nahodil, 1951). However, the rest of what he claims is wrong. University departments were created in 1950 based on a Soviet inspiration, and the two seminaries revived shortly after WWII – the *Národopis* Seminary in Praha and the Seminary for Ethnography and Ethnology in Brno – were incorporated into the newly established departments (Connelly, 2000; Janeček, 2017; Válka et al., 2016). The Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies in Prague was created as late as 1960. Its direct predecessors were the Department of Prehistory and *Národopis*, the Department of *Národopis*, and for some time, there was only an Ethnography and Folklore Studies section within the Department of Czechoslovak History and Archival Science (Janeček, 2017, pp. 143–147). The department in Brno underwent even more changes, and an independent department with the epithet of ‘Ethnography and Folklore Studies’ existed only between 1964 and 1970 (Pavlicová, 2017; Válka et al., 2016)! Moreover, ethnography and folklore studies began to be perceived as a single discipline only in 1954, six years after the communist takeover, when the previously independent discipline of ethnography was merged with folklore studies in a single institute of the Academy of Sciences (Macková, 2016).

To this appellative mistreatment, we might add other examples. Skalník, without any supporting evidence, claims that ‘[e]thnology, as the name of the discipline that was sometimes employed in the prewar times, was now branded as a “bourgeois” science’ (2018b, p. 6) or that ‘only the terms *národopis* and *etnografie* (...) were acceptable during the communist era’ (2018b, p. 6, emphasis in original). ‘Ethnology’ was not a widely used label during the socialist period, but it cannot be said that it was wholly absent. Skalník (1970) himself used the term in a report on ethnology and anthropology in Japan. The Prague Institute of Ethnography and Folklore Studies published an edition named *Opera Ethnologica* in the 1960s–1980s. Moreover, as he mentions in an earlier article, Skalník (2002c) was

employed at the Institute of Ethnology (*Kabinet etnologie*) at Comenius University in Bratislava until 1976 (p. 51). Alternatively, consider the above-mentioned statement by Hynková. When it comes to the word ‘anthropology’, there are further examples of its use without negative connotations (Holý, 1968; Scheufler, 1971; Skalníková & Fojtík, 1969, 1971; Vrhel, 1985).

### **Sociological scrutiny**

I certainly do not want to be viewed as denying Skalník’s right to criticism. However, as I have tried to show, there is a disparity between Skalník’s categorical verdicts and the available evidence. Instead of minutely showing deficiencies in ethnographers’ works or analysing the complex situation in socialist-era ethnography, Skalník limits himself to broad statements about political ideologies influencing the discipline without delving deeper into ethnographers’ published works or even trying to understand ethnographers’ perspectives. Foreign readers may be tempted to say that Skalník’s English texts are based on his previously published Czech works, which contain a thorough treatment of the subject matter, but I am unaware that he has ever produced any. His encyclopaedia entry, as well as the latest article, sadly, seem to conform to his earlier claim that ‘social anthropology (and for that matter cultural anthropology and ethnology) did not miss anything substantial by knowing nearly nothing about “socialist era anthropology<sup>5</sup>”’ (Hann et al., 2007, p. 36; Skalník 2007, p. 187). Sweeping claims and cavalier treatment of the subject matter more than of a scientific spirit may hint at a political project. Indeed, once we accept that politics played a part in guiding Skalník’s pen, we will be able to see his writings in a wholly different light, which finally brings me to the sociological scrutiny and to the approach that I profess.

My approach is grounded in the sociology of science developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu applies a distinct style of reflexivity, which attempts to reveal the ulterior motives present in the production of scientific knowledge. Whereas other approaches in the philosophy and sociology of science focus on the problem of verisimilitude of factual accounts and the capacity of science to produce them, Bourdieu focuses on factors which condition scientists’ factual accounts but are not necessarily motivated by questions related to the state of the world.

Such an assumption is closely related to the distinct ‘political anthropology’ professed in Bourdieusian sociology, which views human agents as primarily motivated by the accumulation of power at the expense of others. This form of

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Ethnology’ in this sentence refers not to Czech ethnology, which Skalník understands as studying one’s own nation and which he equates with the German *Volkskunde*, but to European ethnology, which Skalník views as a comparative discipline which he equates with the German *Völkerkunde* (Skalník, 2018b, pp. 2, 4). I read ‘anthropology’ in the same sentence as a sarcastic jab at Czech ethnology.

political anthropology has been rightfully criticised for its narrow conception of human agents (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1993; Hage, 2013; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). However, it also helps us understand some of the important sources of human action, which human agents are strongly motivated to downplay in their accounts. Bourdieu's political anthropology depicts scientists as competing for power by addressing scientific issues. Success in solving scientific issues brings authority and respectability and opens avenues for achieving the means for further scientific production, such as money or important managerial positions. Therefore, success in science can be seen as an essential source of power over other scientists (Bourdieu, 1991b, pp. 15–16). Such a perspective allows us to approach concrete scientific accounts as a means of domination over others. As Bourdieu put it, scientists' works 'contain the claim to a power, founded in reason, over particular individuals' (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 28–29). Besides sticking to the proper scientific procedure, scientists also resort to improper means. They deliberately misrepresent their colleagues' findings by overemphasising less significant factors at the expense of more significant ones or omitting certain information altogether (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 21).

Bourdieu does not merely view scientists as struggling among themselves by addressing issues they see as legitimate in their field of enquiry. He also views them as trying to impose on other scientists the parameters of scientific legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991b, 2004). Struggles over legitimacy are usually represented by clashes between proponents of antagonistic schools within a single discipline. To quote Ghassan Hage (2013), members of each school 'are personally and collectively busy creating the very world in which they can operate best', and the 'winner imposes both their reality and their practical mastery over reality' (p. 87). Maybe unwittingly, Hage reformulates Bourdieusian sociology in ecological terms – the agents (scientists) are constantly striving to create and maintain a niche which allows their practical being (expertise) to gain the maximum efficiency possible. Given the scarcity of resources, this is usually done at the expense of agents who require a different niche to thrive. If one group of scientists – say, Marxists – would become successful in establishing themselves in, for example, sociology, this would be at the expense of other sociologists who do not share Marxist expertise and who would probably try to overturn the unfavourable circumstances.

This brings us straight back to post-socialist discourse and Skalník's writings. His contributions to the discourse can be viewed as tools designed to establish an anthropological niche within an ethnological one by creating a more favourable 'price formation' for anthropological expertise and its products and a less favourable one for ethnological ones (Bourdieu, 1991a, 2004). In what follows, I present my political reading of Skalník's writings, which were designed to achieve precisely that objective. Nonetheless, this requires me to sketch a broader picture of the context, which will allow us to finally understand why Skalník perceives the mutual dependence between anthropology and ethnology in Czechia.

*The relationship between anthropology and ethnology in the Czech context*

As I wrote earlier, the reader might ask why Skalník, as an anthropologist, attacks ethnology. Why not simply ignore ethnologists? The post-socialist discourse offers examples of strategies which differ from that of Skalník. For instance, he could have argued in the more diplomatic fashion of Chris Hann that, despite any differences between anthropology and ethnology, a mutual collaboration might eventually prove fruitful for both only if they retained their disciplinary identities (Hann et al., 2007, p. 10). Alternatively, he may have adopted an approach diametrically opposed to Hann and preferred by Michał Buchowski (2014) or Jasna Čapo (2014), who tended to play down any differences between ethnology and anthropology and preferred to speak of the ethnoanthropologies of Europe.

Given the Czech context, neither option would be commensurate with Skalník's aims. To see the forces that condition this incommensurability, we should revisit the early 1990s. During this time, Skalník (2002c, 2002d), alongside others, intended to establish an independent anthropology department at Charles University in Prague. Skalník's initially promising negotiations with the university officials faltered, and if anthropology was to gain some space in the Czech academe at all, it had to force itself into coexistence with other disciplines within their institutional background. As a result, anthropology gained marginal space in several university departments (Skalník, 2002c, 2002d). The most important was the footing that anthropology gained within the ethnological institutional framework in Prague: at the university's Department of Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts (formerly known as the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies) and, to a lesser extent, at the academic Institute of Ethnology (known as the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies until the late 1990s). The presence of anthropology, especially at the former institution, sheds light on the relationship between anthropology and ethnology in Czechia and exposes Skalník's motivations.

Turning to ethnology was not only a matter of exigency or desperate choice but also of deep affinities between Czech ethnology and anthropology. In the 1990s, Czech champions of anthropology were also involved in the other discipline. Most of them had originally studied or practised ethnography at university departments, academic institutes, and museums in Czechoslovakia. This was the case of anthropologists-émigrés (Ladislav Holý, Andrew Lass, and Petr Skalník), as well as local scholars (Václav Hubinger, Josef Kandert, and Josef Wolf). The relations went even deeper in Skalník's case. His mother, Olga, was a prominent ethnographer throughout the socialist era. His father served as an editor at the publishing house of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, where he edited, among other books, the translation of the Potekhin's volume. In addition, there are pervasive similarities between the two disciplines. Both are interested in small-scale societies and their customs, religions, and cultures, and both depend on fieldwork. As I have shown before, there was always space for the so-called exotic ethnography within Czechoslovak ethnography.

These fateful connections brought the two disciplines closer to each other in the 1990s, when anthropology could not get hold of institutional independence. Had Skalník and others succeeded in establishing an independent anthropology department in the 1990s, there would likely have been fewer incentives for his harsh criticism of ethnology. Both disciplines would have simply gone their separate ways without much ado. Since this did not happen, ethnologists became anthropologists' main rivals, their significant Others with whom they had to compete for resources. Hence, nascent Czech anthropology was connected to key ethnological institutions. As ethnologists continued to possess a significant numerical advantage throughout the decades to come, the emerging anthropology was, to a profound degree, at their mercy.

This seems like a foolish move. What benefit did ethnologists derive from adopting the unfriendly anthropologists aboard their institutions? Notwithstanding anthropologists' hostility, ethnologists could benefit from such an arrangement. After the fall of the Eastern Bloc, ethnologists, who were depicted as previously involved with official science under socialism (a depiction to which Skalník contributed, as we have seen), felt compelled to present their discipline as innovating and following recent trends in Western scholarship. For this reason, ethnologists likely saw benefits in providing space to anthropology within their own institutional framework. *Český lid*, the leading ethnological journal connected to the Institute of Ethnology, began publishing anthropological articles. The Department of Ethnology started hosting, among others, two senior American-trained anthropologists of Czechoslovak origins: Leopold Pospíšil (1923–2021) and Zdeněk Salzmann (1925–2021) (Skalník, 2002d, p. 108). Moreover, ethnologists, to the dismay of anthropologically minded scholars, began to adopt the label 'anthropology' without deeper epistemological commitments (Hubinger, 1998; Nešpor & Jakoubek, 2004; Skalník, 2002c). Although this move was caused mainly by the compulsion to innovate, the equation between anthropology and ethnology in the Czech context had not been without precedent, as we have seen.

This disciplinary union – the quarrelsome coexistence of anthropology and ethnology within the ethnological institutional background – provides context indispensable for understanding Skalník's writings and his question whether we can create anthropology from the already existing tradition of *národopis*/ethnography/ethnology. Skalník's uncompromising writing against ethnology in the context of this disciplinary union can be interpreted as a constituent of an attempted takeover of the ethnological institutional framework. If the takeover was ever to be successful, Skalník had to prove the deficiency of the rival discipline in the first place. This is what he has consistently been striving for in his writings throughout his career since the early 1990s. If, on the contrary, Skalník had adopted the more charitable viewpoints of Hann, Čapo, or Buchowski, he would have undermined his own goals. Let us now discuss the means by which Skalník fought ethnologists and how they relate to the factual errors in his works.

### *Means of Legitimisation and Delegitimisation*

Beginning in the early 1990s, Czechoslovak academia was understood as having been ravaged by Communist Party rule. There was an observable hunger for Western-educated experts who would offer their expertise and help improve the local situation. A pertinent manifestation of this hunger in ethnology is a series of interviews published in *Slovenský národopis*, a Slovak-based ethnology journal. Among the interviewed were émigré anthropologists Ladislav Holý, Petr Skalník, and Ernest Gellner and émigré ethnologist Vladimír Karbusický (Chorváthová, 1990, 1991, 1992; Krekovičová, 1992). Each interview introduced the expert credentials of the interviewee, their affiliation, degrees achieved in the West, and their rich experience with Western science, all of which served to establish their authority. The interviewees were encouraged to comment on the problems of Czechoslovak ethnology and to suggest solutions to remedy the situation. With the notable exception of Ernest Gellner, the interviewees gladly assumed the position of authority from which they picked at the multiple shortcomings of local ethnology.<sup>6</sup> There were other spaces in which Western-experienced scholars expressed their contentions. Writing from the same authoritative position, Czech-Canadian anthropologist David Scheffel criticised the ethical standards of Czech ethnologists (Scheffel, 1992). Two years earlier, ethnologist Libuše Volbrachťová-Pourová made observations about the insufficiency of Czechoslovak ethnology in her letter addressed to a rehabilitation committee.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from his standing as a Western expert, Skalník drew legitimacy from at least three other sources, which he emphasised in the interview and his subsequent works. The first was his anthropological know-how, demonstrated by his seminal contributions to the problem of the evolution of the state, which would soon be followed by another on the life of Bronisław Malinowski (Claessen & Skalník, 1978, 1981; Thornton & Skalník, 1993). Malinowski's name can be viewed as further consecrating Skalník's anthropological expertise. In the collective anthropological mythology, Malinowski is viewed as the founding father of modern anthropology who set the binding standard of long-term participant observation for anthropological fieldwork. The second source was Skalník's status of an insider derived from his family and professional involvement with Czechoslovak ethnography. Several other émigrés could claim the same insider status (Holý, Karbusický, Lass, & Volbrachťová-Pourová). The third was the status of a victim of the communist regime. Skalník presented himself as a victim of the regime's harassment, which ultimately led to his emigration in 1976 (Skalník, 2002c, p. 51). In 1990, he successfully underwent the rehabilitation process, which gave him the

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<sup>6</sup> Gellner adopted a very charitable stance towards Czechoslovak scholars, as can be further seen in his critical yet affable review of the work of historian Miroslav Hroch (Gellner, 1994, pp. 182–200).

<sup>7</sup> The committee was set to remedy the injustices committed on scholars in the socialist era (Volbrachťová-Pourová, 1990).

official status of a person wronged by communist rule (Skalník, 2002c, p. 53). All of the above can be understood as means of legitimisation which helped elevate Skalník to a position of authority.

What were the means of delegitimisation with which he aimed to take authority away from ethnologists? We can discern two. The first method was designed to demonstrate ethnology's parochialism and provincialism. The examples have already been given in the first part of the article. Skalník highlighted the virtues of anthropology, among which were long-term participant observation (as opposed to ethnology's short-term research trips), advanced theoretical framework (as opposed to ethnology's positivism and historicism), and worldliness, which strikingly differed from ethnologists' nationalist navel-gazing and thematic obtuseness.

The second and more important method of delegitimisation was Skalník's appeal to his readers' anti-communism, which was intimately connected to his own experience. The Velvet Revolution in 1989 fostered strong anti-communist sentiments in the public sphere. After the revolution, many communist functionaries were ousted from their positions in the civil service, judiciary, politics, and other institutions of the state. Measures were adopted at the legislature level. The so-called lustration laws prevented former communist functionaries, agents of State Security, or members of the People's Militias from being appointed to positions in the army or civil service (Eyal et al., 1998, pp. 108–109). However, the Czechoslovak way of dealing with the erstwhile representatives of communist rule was not as stringent as in former East Germany, where it led to a large-scale expulsion of former Communist Party members (Noack & Krause, 2005, pp. 25–26). Lustration laws did not touch all former party members, and many retained their jobs or even climbed the social ladder. This led to the conviction among the general public that many ex-communists, as well as those who had benefited from the socialist regime, continued to be undeservedly active in public life. Even today, accusations related to individuals' past activities in the socialist regime, regardless of the inapplicability of lustration laws, are a strong currency that can mobilise public opinion.<sup>8</sup> What Katherine Verdery (1996) described as the situation in post-socialist Romania is equally applicable to the post-socialist Czech context:

Because the Romanian public generally reviles the name of Communism (...), opposition leaders can capitalize on this by labelling their opponents 'Communists' and 'Securitate'. Any group who charges that the governing party or its nationalist allies are disguised Securitate and crypto-Communists thereby undermines those others' legitimate claim to power, while presenting itself as the true defender of an anti-Communist national interest (p. 90).

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<sup>8</sup> These accusations were recently directed at Andrej Babiš (the now former PM and presidential candidate), Petr Pavel (an army general and the current president), Tomáš Král (president of the Czech Ice Hockey Association), and Igor Stříž (the current prosecutor general).

The revolution in 1989 swept Antonín Robek (1931–2008), one of the most prominent Czechoslovak ethnographers of the 1970s and 1980s and a high-ranking Communist Party member. Robek was the head of the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies at Charles University and the head of the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences for the better part of the 1970s and 1980s. Skalník (2005a, 2005b, 2018b) uses Robek's name as standing for socialist era ethnography with all its alleged vices: its repression of anthropology, nationalism, Marxism–Leninism, and communism. Other ethnographers' names appear very rarely in Skalník's accounts, and Robek's name can be read as synecdochically representing bad socialist-era ethnography. What Skalník does not mention, but many Czech readers probably know, is that many of Robek's subordinates used to be Communist Party members and continued to be active in the discipline and accessed related managerial positions even after the revolution.

Now, it should be clearer why Skalník built his delegitimation strategy mainly on ethnology's subservience to Marxism–Leninism. This tool seems to have been the most suited for the situation. Although Skalník does not profess the explanatory approach of totalitarianism to his subject matter, his sweeping rhetoric resembles it. Skalník depicts socialist-era ethnography as wholly subjected to the deliberation and will of the state, allowing for no exceptions: either you practised Marxist–Leninist ethnography or you could not practice ethnography at all.

Skalník's means of delegitimation were met with reactions designed to counter his rhetoric. Given the strong personal continuity between socialist-era ethnography and post-socialist ethnology, ethnologists felt the need to exculpate themselves and their friends, colleagues, mentors, spouses, and lovers from their erstwhile involvement in official science under communist rule. A distinct explanatory strategy has emerged, which generally accepts that ethnography was influenced by Marxism–Leninism and subjected to the deliberations and coercive measures of the state ruled by the Communist Party. This explanatory strategy differs from Skalník's in adding a seemingly innocuous postulate of the 'islands of freedom' (Balaš, 2022, p. 4). Through this postulate, contemporary ethnologists maintain that within the constricted space of official ethnography, one would find islands inhabited by small groups of ethnographers who were able to defy state socialism and communist ideology and even conduct innovative and cutting-edge research. This approach to the disciplinary past is designed to deflect the kinds of accusations that Skalník levels against ethnologists. Whereas Skalník phrases his texts as if no exceptions existed, for his rivals, the existence of exceptions is crucial because it can support their claim to scientific legitimacy.

As I argued earlier, both strategies work with an underdeveloped analytical apparatus because they only postulate their objects (the omnipotent state, islands of freedom) but do not explain the conditions which made their existence pos-

sible (Balaš, 2022, p. 4).<sup>9</sup> The reason why I speak of them as frameworks instead of theories is twofold. They do not represent robust explanatory frameworks and are employed in an *ad hoc* manner. As a matter of fact, Skalník himself finds the ‘tiny’ Institute of Ethnology at Comenius University in Bratislava to have been the ‘only exception’ in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia (Skalník, 2002c, p. 51). By now, it should not be difficult to see what lies behind this opinion.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

I have tried to describe the main weapons of legitimisation and delegitimisation with which Petr Skalník has waged his crusade for social anthropology in Czechia. Even though Skalník’s means can be seen as well-chosen for the post-socialist context, they did not have the intended effect. He, as well as other champions of anthropology, were unable to take over the ethnological institutional framework. Ethnologists managed to defend their strong position, which was very likely due to the absence of a robust decommunisation scheme, such as the one instituted in post-socialist East Germany (Noack & Krause, 2005, pp. 25–26). Without such a strong force in the background, a large-scale, one-off personnel change was not possible in Czech ethnology, and Skalník’s swords were but words. The scions of Robek’s era and former Communist Party members continued to be active in the discipline for subsequent decades, holding important managerial posts. This suggests that the tools of legitimisation and delegitimisation that Skalník employed in his crusade were not the only potent forces which shaped post-socialist Czech academia.

This does not mean that the crusade for anthropology was an utter failure. Skalník’s texts, irrespective of their veracity, helped establish anthropology’s presence and legitimacy. It can be argued that they drove a wedge between the students of ethnology, some of whom began to strongly identify with anthropology and would later pursue careers in this field. The situation has changed since the 1990s. Today, anthropology has its own professional association and has gained considerable space in various university departments and academic institutes. However, it continues to exist partly within the institutional framework of Czech ethnology.

The sociological perspective I employed in the second part of the article allows for a sort of charitable reading of Skalník’s writings and, by extension, of

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Mervart (2022) has shown that a similar, common-sense totalitarian perspective is employed by contemporary Czech historians and the media (pp. 371–378). Although these historians have objectives that are slightly different from Skalník’s, they also have a stake in depicting Czech(oslovak) history in a certain way.

<sup>10</sup> For an ingenious analysis of similar ambiguities related to the recollections of the life in socialism, see Houda (2019).

post-socialist discourse. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that Skalník's writings also aspire to provide factual accounts. In the first part of my article, I attempt to show where his accounts fall short of veracity. I do not claim that all that Skalník writes is wrong, but it seems to me that the factuality of his texts is in inverse proportion to his politics. If Skalník admitted that the realities of the socialist era had been far more complex and tangled, that Marxism–Leninism had not been hegemonic, that there had been a space, however marginal, for anthropology, that there had been a space for the research on the contemporary socialist society as well as on non-Czech groups, and that ethnology and anthropology had not always been detested words, he would undermine his own political objectives. In other words, by accepting complexity, his oratory would lose its edge.

Given their strongly dismissive stance towards ethnology, Skalník's texts present somewhat extreme contributions to post-socialist discourse from among the Czech advocates of anthropology. Although his fellow travellers, as well as younger generations of anthropologists, share this critical attitude towards ethnology, their criticism has been less fierce and frequent. However, the ferocity of Skalník's writing against ethnology allows us to more clearly see the submerged politics in post-socialist discourse. I believe that the same critical scrutiny would throw an interesting light on accounts written by participants from other CEE countries, who also seem to have high stakes in the struggles between anthropologists and ethnologists. This leaves us with an uncomfortable question. In one of his earlier contributions, Skalník (2002b) introduced himself as an 'observing participant', purportedly to give more credence to his accounts. However, can we really trust the observing participants' accounts when their stakes are this high?

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