Of hopes and ends

Czech transformations after 1989

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It is not the case that the move towards populism has spoiled democratic hopes in central and eastern Europe. The hope was part of the problem from the beginning, despite its emancipatory potential, or even because of it. We have to ask two questions: ‘what kind of hope?’ and ‘hope for what?

It is the end. The end of the 1980s. Two young men, born in the 1960s, have lived out their youth in Prague. Tomáš, son of a dissident, is disillusioned by a nation in which it seems nothing can awaken, and by its oppressive regime, which looks as if it will never end. In June 1989 he emigrates, leaving behind a society incapable of revolution or any real change. Martin, a young student, remains. He encounters both the official and underground Catholic church and has his first erotic experiences with both men and women. Ten years later, he describes his feelings after his baptism and first sexual encounters in his novel: ‘OK, so is this all IT is?’

Both young men were desperately looking for something new. A few months later, something came along that they both – together with the whole of society – had to consider a turning point in their lives. Tomáš was in Paris by then and could not believe that what he had wanted so much had really happened. Martin was a leading revolutionary student at the same time, participating in the reconstruction of the Catholic church in the belief that the experience of repression could make the church wise, open, and self-reflective.

A story of hope

There are numerous stories of the Velvet Revolution. Many are based on overcoming illusions with a view to analysing the actual results. There is probably nothing simpler. The revolutions of ‘89, lived and staged as a miracle and kitsch, invite demystification. But the mood of that moment, even if it can rightly be called an illusion, is also a fact. To tell the full story of the last thirty years, we have to tell this story of hope.

Of course, it is hard to reconstruct the content of this hope. Maybe there was in fact no precise or concrete content, and Jürgen Habermas (and all those who repeated what he
wrote afterwards) was right to describe it as a revolution without new or future-oriented ideas. [1] Still, we may question whether there was, in fact, a discursive space to say something new and, if so, whether anybody was prepared to hear what was said and recognize it as new, especially among academics in the West.

Habermas was probably right, but it is equally probable that many of his readers could not absolve themselves of a sense of intellectual arrogance. In the end, just as some doctors say that a healthy patient is merely a patient who has not been sufficiently examined, any new idea can be recognized by a historian of ideas as nothing but a variation of an older one. From the point of view of the people living the revolution in the streets and squares, what they were doing was new enough: ‘performing’ democracy in a self-organized citizens’ movement. The course of history seemed to be changing around them.

It was a moment of unity. It looked as if almost the whole of society was rising up, and almost everyone could be included. For the time being, even communists were accepted, if they were sorry and willing to agree to change. Czech Roma, the targets of virulent racism before and after (shortly after!) also participated. One of them, who emigrated less than ten years later, recalled feeling that this was the first time they had been together with white people in the public space. As he added in retrospect: he did not know then that it would also be the last time.

This unity was a democratic unity, one that adopted the old word forum from the Latin to describe what the participants claimed to be: a meeting of free citizens, whose discourse and collective action was intended to become the basis of politics, rather than an ‘infallible’ central committee. To be sure, this idea was not particularly new or original. But let us remember Friedrich Engels – Feuerbach may have been a rather poor and narrow-minded thinker, especially in comparison to the richness of Hegel’s philosophy, but coming after Hegel made him revolutionary. Maybe these revolutionaries did not bring anything new, but their timing made them novel, at least in their part of the world.

It was an identity-forming moment. Everybody was a ‘somebody’ now, at least in potentia. Under the homogenizing concrete of state socialist unification lay a beach of various possibilities and identifications...Members of the older generation, until then socialized in a fairly homogenous way, had to choose the role in which they would participate in the new system. This identity moment was not very aggressive; it had a strong pluralist ethos, but not everybody was accepted even from the beginning. Anti-communism could be used against almost all forms of the left, even against former leftwing dissidents who had been imprisoned under the previous regime, or against a moderate liberal post-dissident party.

Martin elaborated on liberal Catholic identity. For him, ‘postmodernism’ meant talking openly about traditions in non-oppressive ways: to play with them without their old unbearable power over us.

What remained of the revolution? An image of societal unity in the face of abuses of power, which still took place sometimes when neoliberal party technocrats tried to maximize their power. A hope that, together with the banal and ugly politics of the parties of ‘crony capitalism’ (a term popularized in the Czech context by Václav Havel), it
is also possible to have a better, more hopeful politics of civil society.

And, also, a counter-feeling: that the revolution of hope was stolen. Almost from the beginning, there were conspiracy theories that it was all a fraud. These did not become mainstream, but disillusion came anyway. News of corruption and organized crime prompted the majority of the population to draw a simple conclusion: the revolution and hope were stolen by the politicians who assumed power.

**A story of class**

When Tomáš started living in France in 1989, he was shocked. Even twenty years after, there was an intensity about his voice when he recollected his feelings. ‘I saw there that all the rubbish about the class society that we had been fed by the communists throughout my childhood and youth was in fact completely true in the West.’

Tomáš was not stupid. Of course, he knew that social inequalities existed in the West. However, what he could not imagine, until he actually experienced it, was the degree to which social inequalities change all aspects of social life, determining all human beings, including those who wanted to ignore the power of money.

When he came back to Prague a few years later, he started to vote for the communists. He remained a non-conformist and an outsider because he understood that the relatively consensual goal of the new post-revolutionary society was the opposite of his own. The new society *wanted* and *needed* to create inequalities alongside plurality. Without inequalities, there could be no reconstructed capitalist ‘normality’, no transformation from the ‘artificial’ and ineffective socialist economy to the ‘natural’ efficiency of the market. The ‘natural order’ adored by some dissidents found its complement in the ‘naturalness’ of the market. [2]

However, there was no clear concept of what inequality would really mean, or on what basis it should be created. After forty years of a so-called ‘classless’ society, the only capital was in large part illegitimate (based, for example, on shadowy business dealings involving the illegal exchange of currencies).

There were three possible ways of creating private capitalist social relations: by returning property to the owners who had been expropriated 40 years earlier (or, more often than not, to their offspring); through the attraction of foreign capital; and through the provision of space for a new strata of domestic capitalists (with all the bad characteristics of *nouveaux riches* and sometimes with mafia connections and background). The Czech Republic followed all three roads. The restitution of property expropriated by the communists is, in the case of the bountiful compensation of the Catholic church, still a hot topic of debate. Many men of the new era, including Václav Havel and Karl Schwarzenberg, inherited large amounts of property from the pre-communist aristocracy or bourgeoisie.

At the same time, privatization created a new wealthy Czech elite, including oligarchs. The wealthiest Czech, Petr Kellner, is the 73rd richest man in the world according to Forbes. By comparison, the richest Pole, Michal Solowow, come in at number 691, the richest Slovak is number 1425, and the richest Hungarian 1941. Kellner is an important
entrepreneur not only in the Czech Republic, but also in Russia and China. Both the two previous Czech presidents, as well as several prime ministers, helped him pursue his interests. [3] The second richest Czech, agrochemical mogul Andrej Babiš (number 617 in Forbes), has won elections with his technocratic populist movement ANO and is currently prime minister.

But the country was also opened up to foreign corporations, such that the outflow of profits has become a serious problem. According to Thomas Piketty,

> Between 2010 and 2016, the annual outflow of profits and incomes from property (net of the corresponding inflows) thus represented on average 4.7% of the gross domestic product in Poland, 7.2% in Hungary, 7.6% in the Czech Republic and 4.2% in Slovakia, reducing commensurately the national income of these countries [...] over the same period [...] the difference between the totality of expenditure received and the contributions paid to the EU budget were appreciably lower: 2.7% of the GDP in Poland, 4.0% in Hungary, 1.9% in the Czech Republic and 2.2% in Slovakia (as a reminder, France, Germany and the United Kingdom are net contributors to the EU budget of an amount equivalent to 0.3% – 0.4% of their GDP). [4]

For a long time, there was no language to capture or criticize the injustices caused by the new inequality. To criticize them could mean that you were siding with the criminal communist ancien régime. It could also mean that you were prone to bad feelings, like envy.

Throughout the ‘free and wild 1990s’, this freedom meant that some in society’s upper echelons did not pay their debts. As of 2002, the problem was solved by giving extreme power to private entrepreneurs in the debt enforcement field, who also received some public power. Overall, this power came to take a heavy toll not only on bankrupt entrepreneurs, but also on many poor or middle-class people with debts that had originally been small, but then spiralled as a result of additional costs. Many Czechs (according to some statistics, almost a million, one tenth of the population) ended up in debt traps. [5]

If you were young in the early days of Czech capitalism, you had significant opportunities. In some areas, such as the media, young people became editors-in-chief at a very early age and enjoyed a legitimacy that their elders lacked after being contaminated by the former regime. As the younger generations started to grow up, they realized that posts were often occupied by incompetent or even fraudulent people who had been young at the right time and now had ‘experience’ and ‘contacts’. At the same time, they ceased to understand the founding myth of their fathers and mothers: the downfall of the great communist evil was not so much a watershed in their lives as the origin of the world that they inhabited. They became tired when its failures continued to be defended using permanent comparisons with the ancien régime. Maybe they wanted their own hope, their own new beginning, but it was nowhere to be found.

**A story of being western**
To be normal, of course, meant to be western. The ‘return to Europe’ meant a return to something that was seen as civilizational normality. It was viewed as a miracle, but a miracle that could happen in reality, sooner or later. The Czech koruna achieving parity with the Deutsche mark was one of several revolutionary fantasies. Was it original enough? At least it was future-oriented.

Nobody said back then that there is no such thing as ‘the West’, the area that occupied such a dominant place in the mental maps of citizens in the new societies. It was a hyperbolized and condensed image of elements of various western societies, especially the few that formed the West’s highly developed core. We can imagine ‘the West’ as a monster with the head of the US, the hands of Germany, the legs of the UK and various bodily organs randomly taken from these countries as well as (to a much lesser extent) Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, and Scandinavia, but almost nothing from southern Europe.

The Czech Republic integrated into the EU, but Czech elites probably considered the English-speaking world, especially the United States, to be the ‘real’ West. It was here that neoliberal found ideological and material inspiration, and thought their market utopia had been realized to some extent. But even reluctant critics of market fundamentalism, such as Václav Havel, were much more attracted to the activist and ‘idealistic’ New World than to cynical and moderate Europe, not only after the experience of the Cold War but also given the moral scandal of war in the former Yugoslavia. Havel then even embraced George W. Bush as an idealist and counterweight to European pragmatists or pacifists.

However, the Czech Republic did not have a choice between joining the European Union and becoming the ‘51st state’ of the USA. Before long, it became a full member of the EU. But, even after the end of various transitional periods, it was clear that membership did not mean equality with the core EU member states. For the post-communist countries, the EU meant being an ‘outsider’ for a long time and having to ‘implement’ many norms without any real democratic process: there was merely the necessity of ‘Europeanization’ and ‘harmonization’. At the same time, they integrated in a semi-peripheral position, knowing that many of their institutions and even some of their food would be of lower quality. For the same work they would receive half the wages or even less compared to core EU member states. A large part of society started to say, as Martin had done in another context, ‘OK, is this all IT is?’

Of course, the EU compensated for this situation by transferring large sums of money. But this money, together with the significant bureaucratic barriers that were meant to prevent it from being stolen (although it was sometimes stolen anyway, in some cases by the big players), was somehow seen as alien. Nobody knew what exactly it meant. Was it development aid? Paradoxically, it would make the relatively rich central European countries the biggest receivers of development aid in the world. Was it compensation for the outflow of profit? If so, it was insufficient, and why were western taxpayers paying to compensate for the profits of corporations anyway? When the western European governments understandably declared, during the refugee crisis, that they would punish central European societies for their unwillingness to accept refugees by cutting these funds, those societies reacted as follows: OK, so the money is compensation for conformity?
Czech oligarch and prime minister Andrej Babiš has run into serious trouble for the misuse of European subsidies. But, for a very long time, a large part of Czech society reacted differently to how they would have if he had stolen state or private money. Money coming from ‘somewhere’ and connected with so many complicated rules seems to have a different status. Czech citizens are in the position of Borges’s God judging a heretic and an inquisitor, unable to find any difference between them. They are unable to discern a difference between the misuse of European money and its correct use, while the EU hardly ever said anything about the conspicuous misuse of its subsidies.

Even now, when the silent European Union has finally said something (in a confidential report, but we are talking about the Czech Republic where the paper was immediately leaked) and confirmed that Babiš lied and stole, society remains divided. The EU report helped spur the largest demonstration since 1989, but Babiš has lost only a few per cent in the opinion polls and he is still the leader of the most popular political party, with almost 30 per cent support in the polls. His voters are still in the position of Borges’s God who cannot decide. Demonstrations which try to imitate the Velvet Revolution are not able to reconstruct the feeling of national unity against those in power. Instead, they provide one half of society with a feeling of moral superiority and historical continuity, standing against the other half.

The period between the Soviet occupation and the Velvet Revolution lasted two decades, and it was too long. When the end came, almost everybody was tired of the old faces and phrases. The period after 1989 has lasted for three decades, so that for many the end is taking even longer to come. Many are hoping for something new. Many others see this new thing as a monster and feel melancholy or anger towards it.

Tomáš welcomed the coming of populism with some leftwing arguments and even more resentments. Finally, he says, we can talk about inequalities and the liberals are being punished for their triumphalism. In fierce arguments with pro-migrant leftists during the refugee crisis, he used leftwing arguments to criticize migration. For him, it is moving people about according to the needs and wishes of capital at the expense of local populations. According to him, the cultural differences embraced by his younger leftwing friends only heighten social inequalities.

Martin defends liberal democracy and tolerance as the legacy of the Velvet Revolution. He left the Catholic church and started to warn against its authoritarian tendencies. One of the men against whom he warns is the ultraconservative disseminator of conspiracy theories Josef, also previously a leader of the student protests in the late 1980s. Unlike him, Martin meets the young generation of the tiny Czech New Left at demonstrations. But he is only partially able to find a common language that they share between them. He is annoyed by how they see the root of all evil in capitalism – it reminds him too much of the phrases which he had to listen to for the first two decades of his life. And he provokes them by seeing the root of too much evil as lying in Russia and by making reference to the old dissident movement and Václav Havel. For these are so distant from their experience, and have so often been abused in political rhetoric over the past thirty years.

The populist turn in central and eastern Europe has many causes, the most important of which probably extend beyond the region itself. But we cannot understand the region’s dynamics if we are not willing to remember the story of hope. It was hope composed of
many contradictory ideas and, perhaps, illusions, and was partially lost, forgotten, realized, and ridiculed; it is still here to some extent, preventing both older and younger generations from bringing new timeframes into play and telling new stories of hope. Maybe hope does not only need to be preserved, but sometimes also cared for with a certain amount of self-reflective distance. Maybe, to save the important elements of hope, we all need to tell ourselves at some point: ‘OK, so this is all IT is.’

Footnotes


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