
The Paradox of 1968

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The events of 1968 on the European continent, divided by the Iron Curtain, were an expression of an error on both sides and as such were a paradox. Waves of discontent with the existing system arose in the East and the West, but what the disaffected on one side were striving to bring about was exactly what the disaffected on the other side were trying to get rid of. Many young people, students, and intellectuals in the West had illusions about the humanitarian potential of the regimes in the 'socialist camp' or at least of the ideas that that camp asserted. They saw those regimes as an alternative to the system of a market economy and liberal democracy, a system in which some elites, at least in Germany and France, were rightly suspected of having collaborated with National Socialism, the birth of which was in the view of the protesters the result of contradictions inherent to the capitalist system. On the other side of the curtain, by contrast, the Czechoslovak reform process, like previous attempts at reform in Poland and Hungary, arose out of the reality of oppression and shortage that characterised the implementation of the socialist ideal in practice. The Czechoslovak reform plan espoused the same democratic values that the 68ers in the West regarded as hopelessly corrupted. One side was thus embracing ideas that the other side was trying to distance itself from, and vice versa.

An observer who happened to witness both reform processes, in Prague and in Frankfurt, would have had an excellent chance to make comparisons, providing a good basis for practical training in the sociological gaze. Theoretical axioms about the diversity of social constructions, each generation's influence on how a society describes itself, and the way reality is created by people themselves, but not under conditions that they choose freely, were being exemplarily filled in with empirical facts before the observer's very eyes. It was possible to witness how fundamentally similar social mechanisms can create entirely different life worlds if they are steered by different outcomes from the discourses of power.

It was thus possible to get a glimpse of the deeper differences between the 'Western' and 'Eastern' versions of these reform movements. The first pronounced difference was a generational one: while in Western Europe it was the younger generations revolting against the generations in power at the time that

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were reproducing a suspect system, the reform movement of the Prague Spring was driven by the generations who after 1945 had had an active hand in building up the socialist regime, and who twenty years later began to realise the fundamental mistakes they had made and consequently also the wrong they had perpetrated against the next generations. The reformers were part of the elites who sustained the regime, and unlike in Western societies the reform movement had the support of most of the population, not just students and intellectuals. I recall conversations with Eduard Goldstücker and his lecture at the University of Konstanz in 1984. He explained why young intellectuals between the wars became deeply involved in the Left movement, but this was also a reflection on how they led their own society astray, and an apology to the younger generations for the restrictions, oppression and isolation they had thus caused them: 'I feel guilty, not so much for having believed in a utopian ideal, as for trying to persuade others that it was true.' [Goldstücker 2001: 27] That this was not merely a retrospective reflection but a deep feeling that existed among the reformers even before 1968 is demonstrated by a quote from the introduction to *Antologie existencialismu* (An Anthology of Existentialism) published at the Higher Party School of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1967: 'Dogmatism essentially made the one brand of philosophy into an affair of the state ... It is no surprise then that this had to be followed by disillusionment. Many felt very strongly [that]: everything is different—or to be fairer—much is different from what we believed and said (and it is not always acknowledged: from what we ourselves were teaching ...)' [Šindelář 1967: 7]. It could be said that while daughters and sons in the West were turning to their parents with the question, what had they done in the past, and tried then to change the future state of things, in the East the generations of parents were trying to correct the mistakes they had made themselves.

Here another significant difference in the construction of social reality is revealed that stems from the distinct historical life backgrounds and the different collective memory of those involved on each side. One of the essential goals of the reform movements on either side of the Iron Curtain was to open up a new perspective on the past as a means to paving the way for a better future. In the Marxist tradition the Western European students' movement called attention to the past of the existing democratic systems as sullied by fascism. In extreme cases it saw the destruction of capitalism, as the social order that gave birth to fascism, to be a guarantee that the past would never repeat itself. The reformers of the Prague Spring, by contrast, had already witnessed the destruction of capitalism and knew very well that achieving that ideal did not lead to the birth of an ideal society, as it involved a wave of oppression and violence that destroyed many of the humanitarian achievements that had been ushered in by the previous, 'bourgeois' revolution. Viewed in this light, the Prague Spring thus also introduced a new perspective on the nation's past, the difference being that this perspective allowed for and acknowledged the positive attributes of civil society and liberal democracy.

This attempt and the suppression of it by Warsaw Pact troops impacted the development of society on several levels. It of course directly affected the life stories of the thousands involved. But there were also historical ramifications: on the more general level of societal evolution the suppression of the 'Prague Spring' represented a thwarted opportunity to create an alternative to the actually existing Soviet-style socialist regimes—a failing that contributed to the collapse of the 'socialist camp' twenty years later. As Jürgen Habermas (1973) shows in his analysis of the problems of the late capitalist state, Western European societies have at their disposal two basic models and legitimising narratives, and they regularly swing back and forth between them in order to resolve, with relative success so far, their internal conflicts. The social problems that are caused by market dysfunctionality under liberal or neoliberal regimes can be corrected by the regime and semantics of the welfare state within the frame of the same system, without the need to make any radical change to the system's basic parameters. The redistributive welfare state, in rectifying and thereby protecting the market economy, serves as a legitimate variant of the same system. The chance to create a variant of the system to rectify the dysfunctions of the planned economy and the dominance of one party that the Prague Spring could have been was however rendered impossible by the system itself. Looked at this way, the end of the Prague experiment did not test the limits of the social-democratic possibilities for the evolution of Western societies. The welfare state, functioning in the conditions of a pluralist democracy, remains an essential system variant for maintaining social peace in European-type market economies. What the Prague Spring probably foundered on was the attempt to create a civil and thus pluralist society that would operate on the basis of limited private property. It was the limits of actually existing socialism that were thereby tested, not the limits of Western-type social democracy. Observed from a purely positivist perspective, the Prague experiment could have shown whether it is possible to base a democratic pluralist system on some form of collective ownership, i.e. to set it up in some other way than its traditional form. To put it in sociological terms, the end of the Prague experiment was a demonstration of the evolutionary limitations of a system incapable of providing the system variants that were necessary for its survival. For many this was a sign of the irreformability of actually existing socialism, which was ultimately proven to be true by the developments of 1989.

The year 1968 also of course had a dramatic impact on the development of Czechoslovak society. The relaxation of censorship and the relative freedom of the press and freedom of assembly gave many, and especially the young generation, a taste of civic freedom. Sociological surveys from that time [Tížik and Kmeř 2016: 30ff] show a strong identification among the population with the values of liberal democracy and civil society, even among members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). From a sociological perspective what is remarkable is that support for reform seems to have been motivated by opposition to political oppression and the desire for freedom, and not by economic deprivation. This fact was later often overlooked when Western analysts made assumptions about the

motives behind the transformation after 1989. The longing for consumer goods and economic advantages in their view played the primary role, a view moreover consistent with the expectations of the West German population, welcoming their new compatriots from the East at border crossings with wreathes of bananas, the shortage of which in East Germany had come to symbolise the shortcomings of actually existing socialism.

The suppression of the reform movement and the ensuing 'normalisation' process had however a lasting effect up to the present day. There were consequences for the social structure of society. Thousands of life stories that remained anonymous were affected. My friends in Prague who lived through the Prague Spring and the two decades of normalisation that followed recall that the worst part for them was the loss of all hope that was felt after August 1968. This, apparently, is how the 'grey zone' (Šiklová 1990), to which most of the population belonged, felt about life, confronted again with the conditions that the Prague Spring had been trying to eliminate. Radical changes occurred on the level of the 'functional elites' (Šrubař 1998). There was a mass turnover of members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and hence vast replacements of political, economic, administrative, cultural, and scientific staff. And not just the leading exponents of reform were affected. Approximately 40% of the functional elites in the forenamed sectors lost their jobs. More than 400 000 CPC members were expelled or saw their Party membership cancelled. To replace them and fill nomenclature positions the Party recruited more than 300 000 'candidates' in the 1970s. Given that approximately one-half of these new members were under the age of 25, the functional elites were markedly rejuvenated by a generation that pragmatically took advantage of the Party's normalisation measures to rise up the social ladder. Many members of these functional elites, especially in the economic sector, who had priority access to useful information and connections, became successfully involved in the privatisation process after 1989 and under new conditions further profited from their elite head start. Opposite this group were a considerable number of people who either were engaged in the dissident movement or sooner or later emigrated. One could say that the year 1968 dealt out a new hand of cards in terms of people's life stories and upward or downward social mobility, the consequences of which remain apparent in the structures of Czech society up to the present day.

How 1968 affected individual life stories can be demonstrated through my own example. This example is not typical, but it can serve as an illustration. Like for many others, the onset of 'normalisation' after August 1968 was also my reason for going into exile. This was not an easy decision. For the thirty-somethings of today, used to traveling to every possible and impossible corner of the world with their EU passport and returning home unobstructed, it is hard to imagine that crossing an imaginary line in the landscape could entail the irretrievable loss of one's home, family, and friends. The departure into the unknown, with no option of returning, led, on the other hand, to remarkable and often paradoxical experiences that were not without their own impact. When I arrived at the

university in Frankfurt, I discovered to my surprise that the study of Marxism and its philosophical and economic sources that I was required to go through in Prague had prepared me perfectly to teach in the revolutionary environment of a German university. Although my interests were phenomenology, the sociology of knowledge, and East European history, the students were interested in Marxism in its various versions. Reactions to my Marxist qualifications were, however, varied: while some colleagues were happy to entrust me with the respective portions of their classes because they would be in the hands of someone with direct experience of Marxist practices, others suspected that based on this very same fact the 'pure teaching' of Marxism would be compromised. I remember seminars in which harsh debates erupted over whether it is at all possible to talk in socialist circumstances about 'alienation' the way Karel Kosík dared to in his *Dialektika konkrétního* (Dialectics of the Concrete) [Kosík 1976 (1963)]. What was unpleasant was when radical students stood watch at the entrances to libraries to monitor what books readers were checking out. I developed from this the 'pedagogical' habit of always presenting students with every perspective on a given topic in the most genuine way possible and leaving them to form their own opinion on the matter. A university should be a well-laid table, where everyone can choose according to their preferences and taste.

Exile and normalisation were not, however, the only ways in which 1968 impacted lives and careers. The gradual thaw in the regime had been felt several years earlier. The more relaxed environment before 1968 had had a positive effect on the development of the social sciences and sociology, evidence of which was the restoration of institutions in these fields in the second half of the 1960s and a number of studies in which Czechoslovak society was charted from a sociological perspective for the first time since 1948. In 1965 it again became possible to study sociology at Charles University's Faculty of Arts, albeit in very provisional conditions. There was no access to current international literature so students had to depend on what they learned from their lecturers. The Institute of Sociology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences began functioning and there students were able to take part in the work on empirical projects and get their first insight into the social and value structures of their own society. It became possible to study sociology abroad, albeit only in the allied 'foreign land' of Poland. Group excursions to Western universities were organised for students and the first contacts were formed with their student movement. Rudi Dutschke appeared in Prague, not to mention Allen Ginsberg, eating dumplings with his hands. Jan Patočka began lecturing at the Faculty of Arts again and his teaching opened up horizons that extended well beyond the scope of instruction provided up to that time. Under the influence of this 'early spring' a revival process set in even in places where one would not have expected. In 1967 the Department of Marxist Philosophy at the Higher Party School published—though only for internal purposes—an anthology containing the first translations of Martin Heidegger's writings. Also, the doors of the Party vault opened slightly and some 'libri prohibiti' were allowed

to see the light of day, such as Karl Marx's first version of *Das Kapital* known as 'Grundrisse'. Available on photographs not even the size of postcard format, we pored over them with a magnifying glass and discovered that even much of Marx was different from what the official version told us. This led to the realisation that a prophet can turn into a heretic. For the young generation the world began to open up in all its pluralistic diversity, which official teachings, which divided societies by class into two solid camps of truth and lies, tried to conceal, but which obviously it was not able to suppress.

My interest in phenomenology and its development had been awoken in Prague in those days by Patočka's work. Intersubjectivity and the construction of social reality were themes that touched fundamentally on the basic sociological question of 'how is society possible'. My departure for Germany was also motivated by the awareness that the 'normalisation' that was beginning to take shape would not be the kind of environment in which this interest could be pursued. My Frankfurt dissertation drew me further in the direction of 'phenomenological sociology' and ultimately into the group around Thomas Luckmann, where this subject was pursued and supported. I somehow automatically became a part of something that considered itself a phenomenological movement, whose older generation was concerned with the fate of Jan Patočka, to whom many of that generation were tied by close friendship. Walter Biemel approached me at that time and asked whether I couldn't begin translating selected writings by Patočka into German, a task my wife and I took on. In cooperation with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna I became the co-editor of a series of Patočka's writings, which brought me into contact with dissidents at home and in exile. I found myself in the position of someone with one foot in sociology and the other in phenomenological philosophy, which was then cemented by my decision to become the publisher of the sociological and phenomenological writings of Alfred Schütz. And it seems that this awkward position in the times of specialisation in the social sciences will remain mine for life. Viewed in this light, the year 1968 was thus truly a fateful year.

If I were to sum up the preceding comments in a concluding statement, it would be roughly the following: The Prague Spring of 1968 and its subsequent suppression impacted many people's life stories, thereby altering the social structure of Czechoslovak society, with consequences that can still be felt today. As a thwarted attempt at trying out a systemic alternative, the suppression of reforms in Prague became one of the factors that led to the collapse of the systems of actually existing socialism twenty years later. This is the main difference from the results of the 1968 movement in Western Europe. The reforms that were called for in the West supported the welfare state. The functional necessity of the redistributive welfare state for preserving social peace within a market economy wedded to a pluralist democracy did not remain the programme of social democracy alone. It became generally accepted as a political necessity. This paradoxically had the simultaneous effect of weakening social democratic parties, as they lost

what distinguished them from other parties and consequently also a portion of their electorate. While the quashing of the Prague Spring ultimately helped to destabilise the socialist regimes, the reform impetus that came from the student movement in Western Europe was largely absorbed within society and helped to strengthen the existing system. Thus, the paradox of the unintended consequences of intentional acts.

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