Jóhann Páll Árnason: A Pražák

Lubomír Dunaj | ORCID: 0000-0002-5513-3711
PhD, University assistant, Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
lubomir.dunaj@univie.ac.at

Abstract

The “Czechoslovakian Sixties” can be described as the culmination of an incredible intellectual activity. Jóhann P. Árnason spent this time as a student at Charles University in Prague, deeply immersed in the Czech and Slovak intellectual life. This article claims that his personal experience with “Czechoslovakian (Hi)Story,” as well as with its intellectual reflections, significantly influenced the development of his socio-theoretical point of view. However, this ambitious claim will be confined to only three foci. First, Jóhann Árnason will be placed into the Czechoslovakian context. By this, the intellectual and artistic achievements of the 1960s will be put into contrast with the creative “impotence” of the 1990s, which, inter alia, is a consequence of the dominance of the transitological approach in political and social sciences at that time (i.). This approach is strongly criticized across the paper, especially in the second part, introducing Boris Buden's critique of it (ii.) Finally, that “intellectual impotence” will be explained by using Árnason's reading of Jan Patočka's text Supercivilization and its Inner Conflict (iii.).

Keywords


It must be said that the philosopher is not a servant of politicians, a keeper of fabricated laws, which are in fact but yawning and unspirited precipices ... But is this not self-evident? Asks he who has just awakened from a dogmatic doze. Of course, it is. And it is tragic to be forced to repeat in the heart of Europe and in the second half of the 20th century that no
society in the world can go on evading the function which has pertained, pertains, and will pertain to a thinker.

Sviták, 1968, p. 18-19

There are many open discussions and diverse opinions about the nature and course of post-communist post-1989 East Central and Eastern Europe. Yet, one conclusion can be made. Despite great hopes in 1989, the years that followed have now proved to be a disappointment rather than a success. The Western patterns and designs of social, political, and economic developments have been replicated and imitated (Krastev & Homes, 2019), proving insufficient in many areas. There are plenty of social flaws (not to speak of certain democratic shortcomings) in the Western countries, a number of which the Eastern European countries adopted alongside. Moreover, many of those deficits were deeply problematic in other respects (e.g., the irresponsible, nature-depleting consumerism), even immoral, such as the USA’s “war adventures” (especially in the Middle East, also participated by some of the East-Central European “new NATO countries”) or simply misguided (e.g., the hope that market fundamentalism will be the solution). Worse still, they have often been adopted in a narrow sense by jumping on the bandwagon of Coca-colonialism. In fact, those East-Central European countries were much more Americanized than Westernized in the sense that Milan Kundera had in mind.1 His “dream” of the return of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary to “Europe,” described in his famous essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, took a paradoxical turn after 1989. From being part of the West that had already been “kidnapped, displaced and brainwashed” (Kundera, 1984, p.33) by Russia (where Kundera saw the West as synonymous with Europe), those countries, while not literally kidnapped2, were indeed brainwashed and displaced by another hegemon. They did not return to Europe mentally, but rather became a

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1 The reason why to mention Milan Kundera here is not arbitrary. He used to be and probably still is (considered) one the most relevant pundits to be interviewed about East-Central European issues, not only because of his own interest in this region and his personal participation in a few crucial events, but also because he counts among the world’s most famous figures from this region. Yet, to be clear from the outset, although I consider his work to be monumental, and relevant not only for understanding developments in certain parts of the world (especially East-Central Europe and France), but also for understanding the contradictions of modern society as such, I do not share his overall pessimism about developments in contemporary Western societies. See (Dunaj – Mertel 2022).

2 At least not yet, but this question remains open. Attempts to deploy American military bases in the region are still present and, in some countries such steps have already become a reality. This could eventually result in a certain kind of control and even occupation, in many respects not unlike that by the Soviet Union. While with regard to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the presence of such bases doubtlessly appears to be justified, it is not entirely easy
mental “satellite” of the USA, especially in their view on economics. The idea of a modern postwar Europe (i.e., of a welfare state), which helped to create the European social model, has had to be justified again and again. Even the financial and economic crises of 2008/2009 did not contribute to saving the reputation of a social state. The prevailing economic social imaginary still remains neoliberal.

Although, as a matter of course, detailed research comparing individual countries must be conducted to verify this hypothesis of a one-sided view on economic and societal development, Jóhann Árnason’s assessment is the most proper point of departure:

the most fundamental – albeit often latent – premise of transitology is that the current western constellation of capitalism, democracy and the nation-state (allowing for some differences of opinion on the relative weight of the last factor) represents a universal and definitive model on its way to global ascendancy [...] All in all, this approach reflects a very limited interest in historical experiences outside the western heartland; there is no reason to disagree with a Hungarian critic [Rudolf Tökés – L.D.] who described transitology as a form of intellectual neo-colonialism.

ÁRNASON, 2000, p. 90

Indeed, three decades later, we can conclude that the ‘ideology of transitology’ (Buden, 2009) has played a crucial role for too long. Although “the ‘transitology’ of the 1990s now seems to be sinking into well-deserved oblivion” (Árnason, 2011, p. 131), this may not be really so unless its ‘ideological’ heritage, too, disappears from collective memory, which is not the case with a significant part of intellectual, cultural, but especially economic and business elites. In this paper, such negative heritage will be viewed as widespread collective abandonment or (perhaps more aptly) internal mental ‘capitulation’ to the attempt to creatively react to the social and political challenges brought to life by the post-1989 transition, which, in our view, is not unlike the uncritical appropriation of the Stalinist interpretation of Marxism by the East-Central European intellectuals after WWII.

What follows is an argument that Johann P. Arnason’s work in the field of social theory provides a tool for mitigating the tendency towards any internal

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3 E.g., one could start such an analysis with works by Phillip Ther, Chris Hann, Michal Kopeček, Kristen Ghodsee, Mitchell Orenstein or William Outhwaite, among others (See for instance Ther 2016; Ther 2019; Hann 2000; Hann 2002; Kopeček 2019; Ghodsee & Orenstein 2021; Outhwaite 2015).
‘colonization,’ whose only option on offer has been the (reduced version of the) Western patterns of development, producing captive minds in its stead.

Árnason and the Czechoslovakian context

Many momentous events happened in East Central Europe in the 20th century, which attracted worldwide attention and at the same time attested to its own creative intellectual initiatives. Some of them, which belong to the Czechoslovakian part of the “Story,” will be mentioned below. The reason behind discussing Árnason in this context is twofold. First, the author of this article comes from the above geographical region and thus has a “natural” interest in this part of Árnason’s “cv.” Yet secondly, and more importantly, Jóhann Árnason himself claims that

\[\text{[f]or a comparative study of crises and transformative processes in Soviet-type regimes, the Czechoslovak case is of the highest importance, and for the political debates of the post-Communist phase, it could at least serve as a reminder of unsolved problems and underlying realities which the dominant liberal utopia prefers to ignore.} \]

ÁRNASON, 1993, p. 181

As will be argued, the “Czechoslovakian Sixties” can be described as the culmination of an incredible intellectual activity, which started gradually with the political easing in the latter half of the 1950s (Kopeček, 2008) and gathered momentum until the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops. Jóhann P. Árnason spent a significant part of those years as a student in Prague (1960-66). This personal experience enabled him to have a deep immersion in Czech and Slovak intellectual life, which has accompanied him throughout his entire career.4 Naturally, the “Sixties” of the 20th century were eventful and “historic” not only in Czechoslovakia, but also in most parts of the world. What, however, makes the Czechoslovak reflections from that time so unique and inspiring was convincingly summed up by Milan Kundera in 1967:

The events we have lived through in the last thirty years were no milk and honey, but they gave us tremendous working capital for artistic exploitation. Our experience with democracy, fascism, Stalinism and socialism contains everything essential that makes the twentieth century what it

4 “[B]eing there and observing the progress of the reform movement in the 1960s was of course an invaluable sociological education” (Árnason, 2018, s. 433).
is. Our experience may thus enable us to ask more basic questions and to create more meaningful myths than those who have not lived through this whole political anabasis.

Kundera, 1971, p. 148

Now we can add two more crucial components: the post-1989 neoliberalism and the attempt to democratize Eastern European countries.

Regarding the 20th-century Czech and Slovak history (their joint country “Czechoslovakia” existed in the periods 1918-1939 and 1945-1992), we could mention (at least) three historical events, which must not be forgotten by or deleted from (not only Czech and Slovak) historical books. First, the Munich agreement of 1938, which allowed Hitler's Nazi Germany to annex a major part of Czechoslovakia – most Czech and Slovak citizens still see this event as a betrayal of Czechoslovakia by the United Kingdom and France. The bulk of the Czech and Slovak population, especially members of the older generation, still remember the slogan “About us, without us!” (Czech/Slovak: O nás bez nás!). Whether the sense of historical wrongdoing on the part of Slovaks or Czechs is justified or not, the historical lesson of this event is that sacrificing small nations in geopolitical power games does not always pay off. Hitler should have been stopped in September 1938. It is hard to tell if Árnason's interest in small, peripheral, and supposedly unimportant nations has been fueled by the fact that he himself comes from one (Iceland). Be that as it may, all his works, especially those on Czechoslovakia, show that small nations should “count” as well. Not only because they offer a glimpse of another culture, but rather because members of a small nation, too, have something of value to contribute to all spheres of human and social life. The reason for emphasizing this is that there are new serious threats to small nations today: On the one hand, neoliberal globalization and, on the other, increase in geopolitical instability.

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5 It is important to emphasize that I do not aim to idealize Czechoslovak history or the Czechoslovak state, for I am fully aware of its historical problems and failures. However, critiques such as that by Mary Heimann (2011) would require a detailed analysis, which I cannot offer here. My only goal is to put Jóhann Árnason into the context that influenced much of his personal development.

6 See for instance Kundera’s essay “The Unloved Child of the Family” about Leoš Janáček, which discusses how difficult it is for an author descending from a small nation to gain recognition abroad (Kundera 1995, pp. 177-196). See an interesting contribution on the relevance of small nations by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (Bjørnson 2018), the Norwegian writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1933.

7 Worthy of further discussion is Kundera’s attempt to define a small nation: “the small nation is one whose very existence may be put into question at any moment; a small nation can disappear, and it knows it” (Kundera 1984, p. 35). When I presented the first draft of this article
The second event worth remembering is the *Velvet* (in Czech) or *Gentle* (in Slovak) revolution of 1989, which restored Czechoslovakia’s position among democratic countries. However, the bitter experience with postsocialist economic and social transformation has marred the beautiful story of a non-violent revolution (as well as the immaculate image of some dissidents, including Václav Havel). Even the admirable civic initiative *Charta 77* seems to be losing its prominent position in the Czech historical memory (in the Slovak part of the former federation, its attention was only marginal from the very start). While we could argue about the historical significance of this event, the discussion may start regardless of its ambivalent nature with James Krapfl’s strong conclusion that:

> [I]n no other modern revolution, however, has the idea of *humanita* been so elevated and consciously defended (with the exception, of course, of kindred revolutions in Poland and East Germany in the 1980s).

*Krapfl, 2013, p. 108*

As indicated above, the implementation of the neo-classical version of post-1989 capitalism was accompanied by only a few own initiatives in the social, political, or cultural areas. The contrast to the cultural creativity of the 1960s was tremendous. True, we can point out advances in the sphere of politics when some semblance of constitutional democracy was established. However, the overall result of the transition has been ambivalent with too many negative consequences, not only in terms of the economy; what was also brought to life were conservative, nationalist, and even fascist tendencies along with the oligarchizing of the political sphere. Indeed, as Jóhann Árnason noted during one of our personal encounters, “it is a historical catastrophe for Central and Eastern Europe that the collapse of socialist regimes corresponds with the neoliberal wave in the West.” There is not enough room here for discussing James Krapfl’s critique on Jürgen Habermas’ dismissal of 1989 because of “its total lack of ideas that were either innovative or oriented toward the future,” while “the recent rectifying revolutions took their methods and standards entirely from the familiar repertoire of
the modern age (Habermas)” (Krapfl, 2013, p. 105). Nor can we deal with Krapfl’s problematization of François Furet’s conclusion that “with all the fuss and noise, not a single new idea has come out of Eastern Europe in 1989 (Furet)” (ibid.). Nevertheless, now we can see that it was the post-1989 development, rather than the year 1989, that was impotent. The idea of humanness has already been mentioned. James Krapfl lists a few other ideals (nonviolence, self-organization, democracy, fairness, socialism) which, while not completely new, acquired a specific and inspiring content and, if taken more seriously, the situation could have looked differently. At this point, we will confine ourselves to the very first line of Krapfl’s arguments, i.e., that “Habermas and Furet proffered these judgments, of course, without actually consulting much evidence” (Krapfl, 2013, p. 105). By pointing this out, we are returning to Árnason’s critique of transitology from the introduction, in which he emphasized that such an approach reflects a very limited interest in historical experience outside the western heartland. We are afraid that many of (but not only) Habermas’ followers are stuck on the idea. In this respect, Árnason’s critique of Habermas should be revisited (Árnason, 1991) and further discussed as it has developed in Árnason’s pluralistic orientation and his emphasizing of labyrinthine aspects of modernity (Árnason, 2020).

The idea of humanness doubtlessly brings us to the most significant event of the Czechoslovakian part of “world history” – the Prague Spring of 1968, with its main figure Alexander Dubček.8 What has made this brief period (from 1963 to 1969, or, more narrowly delimited, from January 5 to August 21, 1968) so significant historically is not the rather vague idea of socialism with a human face, nor was it the invasion by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact armies, which put an end to the legitimacy of the state-socialist regime (even though today, having experienced the difficult and in many regions literally devastating post-1989 transformation, the Slovak and Czech public at large feels considerable nostalgia).9 Rather, it was significant due to the unprecedented cultural and artistic

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8 While this is not vital to my argument in this paper, I would still like to correct any possible false impression that Czechoslovak history was de facto only the Czech history by emphasizing Alexander Dubček’s Slovak ethnicity. For a better grasp of the whole reform process, see for instance his role as the leader of the Communist Party of Slovakia in Bratislava. He held the position from 1963 to 1968, largely contributing to the political thaw in the Slovak part of the country: see Sikora (2013). This footnote, however, does not detract from the importance of the “Czech contribution” to the “Prague Spring,” which, without a doubt, was of more weight than that made by the Slovak part. On the other hand, the Slovak Republic and its history are often overlooked not only by the rest of Europe, but by the Czechs as well. In this respect, I have always been overwhelmed by Jóhann Árnason’s profundity of knowledge of, and interest in, the Slovak past and present.

9 In Slovakia, the “Red nostalgia” has been even the highest in the region (Ghodsee & Orenstein, 2021, p. 120).
creativity\textsuperscript{10} of which these two small nations were capable at that time. Moreover (and this should be emphasized again and again), many (most?) of those achievements were created with the ambition of exceeding the narrow ethnic borders and advancing the universal human condition.\textsuperscript{11} And although Árnason’s conclusion of the Prague Spring is sufficiently sober,\textsuperscript{12} the events of 1938, 1968 and 1989 will continue to be subjects of research interest in the future and may keep inspiring generations ahead. By saying this, we agree with Árnason that we cannot “understand democracy as a singular normative project. It is one of the political forms of modernity (and other forms, including its totalitarian adversary, are related to it in complex and sometimes opaque ways). As such, it gives rise to a variety of projects and patterns” (Árnason, 2011, p. 123).

Thus, to place Árnason in his main intellectual context (as the author of this study has learned firsthand, he considers himself intellectually a Praguer – “Pražák” in Czech), let us say a few more words about those incredible achievements and figures of those exceptionally creative Czechoslovaks in the 1960s, with an awareness that such a list would be incomplete. There is a broad consensus on the most valuable contributions in cinematography, literature, and philosophy, all of them helping to cultivate the “software” of humankind. The Czechoslovak New Film Wave both produced, and was produced by, such incredible directors as Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, Juraj Herz, Štefan Uher, Juraj Jakubisko, and Věra Chytilová. As a matter of fact, Milan Kundera must be mentioned again as one of the most internationally recognized writers of the 20th century. Others could be listed as well – Bohumil Hrabal, Ludvík Vaculík and Ladislav Mňačko are my favorites (almost equally interesting have been literary theorists Eduard Goldstücker and Květoslav Chvatík). In philosophy, the most prominent figures

\textsuperscript{10} See Kusin (2002).

\textsuperscript{11} At this point, the name of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, founder and first president of Czechoslovakia, comes up, as emphasized by J. Krapfl, especially by the idea of humanness: “It was a central feature of Masaryk’s philosophy of political culture and sprang up again with startling brilliance in the idea of “humane socialism” in 1968 (Krapfl, 2013, p. 108). Indeed, his idea, in which the “Czech question” is the general human question was an important part of Czechoslovak political self-understanding. See Masaryk (1924) and Kohák (2019).

\textsuperscript{12} “We can only speculate about the course which the reform movement would have taken if it had been left alone, but it is hard to imagine anything other than a multi-party system with strong statist tendencies and a mixed economy operating within a global capitalist framework (in both respects, the contrast between this abortive precedent and the present transition may be less radical than the accompanying rhetoric would suggest). These changes would, however, have taken place in a more promising context. A less obsolescent economy, a less demoralized society and a less constrained political imagination might have made for a more inventive democratizing process than the one which is now going on [in the years 1989-1993 – L.D.]” (Arnason, 1993, p. 181).
internationally are Karel Kosík and Jan Patočka (both have decisively influenced Jóhann P. Árnason’s work), and also Milan Šimečka and Radovan Richta. As mentioned above, as a young student at Charles University, Árnason was part of this cultural and intellectual climate in the 1960s. At the time (in his own words), Prague was definitely the most interesting city in Eastern Europe, and probably one of the most interesting places in Europe. It is worth mentioning that there were dozens of prominent artists, writers, philosophers, actors and actresses who started their careers in the 1960s. Most of them have been mostly recognized in Czechia and Slovakia (for instance, the writer Rudolf Sloboda, the singer Hana Hegerová, the philosopher and the poet Egon Bondy), but a few of them also won international renown (such as the leading dissident, writer and the first post-revolutionary president Václav Havel, the theologian Tomáš Halík and the actor and scriptwriter Zdeněk Svěrák, whose movies are considered the Czech “family silver”). Sociologist Jaroslav Krejčí deserves our attention, too, despite being only marginally connected with the Czechoslovakian sixties. Without a doubt, Jóhann P. Árnason deservedly belongs in this exclusive company. Although neither Czech nor Slovak in origin, he is still very deeply “settled” in the Czechoslovak intellectual community, with such incredible knowledge of Czech and Slovak culture, politics and history – and such command of languages that one can hardly believe that this graceful professor was not born in Prague, Brno or Bratislava.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to reconstruct all of Árnason’s interactions with Czech and Slovak authors, but further research in this field might be useful. Nor can we cover here Árnason’s influence on the present “Czechoslovakian” intellectual discourse, which would be both interesting and valuable, given Árnason’s prolific efforts (Šubrt & Árnason, 2010; Árnason et al., 2010; Árnason, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c). On the other hand, reconstructing the impact on Árnason’s work by the East-Central European region, especially

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13 In order to offer a more complex picture of the artistic and intellectual creativity of East-Central Europe, let us quote Milan Kundera’s complaint that in his view this part of Europe was already forgotten in the 1980s (needless to say, his list of incredible personalities coming from this region could be easily extended): “So is it fault of Central Europe that the West hasn’t even noticed its disappearance? Not entirely. At the beginning of our century, Central Europe was, despite its political weakness, a great cultural center, perhaps the greatest. And, admittedly, while the importance of Vienna, the city of Freud and Mahler, is readily acknowledged today, its importance and originality make little sense unless they are seen against the background of the other countries and cities that together participated in, and contributed creatively to, the culture of Central Europe. If the school of Schönberg founded the twelve-tone system, the Hungarian Béla Bartók, one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century, would have known how to discover the last original possibility in music based on the tonal principle. With the work of Kafka and Hašek, Prague created a great counterpart in the novel to the work of the Viennese Musil
his interactions with the Budapest School, would also be worth looking into. It must be noted, however, that with Árnason’s broad research interest in many philosophical and sociological traditions (especially French and German), and Árnason’s incredibly deep historical knowledge of other cultures and civilizations, it would be improper to overestimate his (personal) Czechoslovakian experience as crucial. Nevertheless, such research could not only help to better grasp the evolution of Árnason’s social and civilizational theory, but also stimulate interest in the historical transformations and ruptures of East-Central Europe, from which we can learn much about the nature and potential avenues of social change and political revolutions.

The Post-communist situation

It is not easy to grasp all aspects, reasons, and technicalities of such a change as occurred in the analyzed region in the 1990s – from the ideas of democratic socialism (see Krapfl above) to radical neoliberalism and intolerant anticommunism. Let us put aside whether such mental somersaults are generated by an effort at personal gain and hence are nothing but a display of pure opportunism, or indeed are part of conditio humana. The latter means that only a fraction of the population – usually emerging randomly – can take a critical distance from its social reality, while the rest of society just goes with the flow, unconsciously accepting coincidentally changing social imaginaries. This, indeed, is an old philosophical problem and Árnason’s work in this field (inspired especially by the works of Cornelius Castoriadis), offers knowledgeable and instructive insights by socio-historizing subjects (and thus relativiz-
ing individual identities) without stealing their autonomy and the potential for future personal as well as societal development (Árnason, 2003). The rapid shift in public opinion towards anticommunism and against socialism seems to confirm that. However, for this to happen, further and more detailed discussion is necessary. For now, let us confine ourselves to a few points as an attempt at a reconstruction of what happened in East-Central Europe in the 1990s.

The statement made by Rudolf Tökés (the Hungarian critic mentioned by Árnason in the introduction) regarding the above-mentioned creativity and cultural importance of the East-Central European space in the 1960s, that transitology has morphed into some kind of intellectual neo-colonialism, has a bitter sting. Even more lamentable is that it really expresses the actual state of reality. Although the discourse on the “colonies” within the EU focuses predominantly on economic aspects,16 the “ideology of transitology” covers a much broader spectrum and offers a comprehensive worldview, a “way of life” and even a meaning of life (for a supporter of the ideology of unstoppable historical progress). Certainly, we cannot embrace all the aspects of the problem here, but Boris Buden, another East-Central European author (of Croatian origin) already mentioned, offers an explanation regarding the ideologization of transitology. He points out that the concept of transition was originally established in order to grasp various cases of regime change in South America and Southern Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At first, it meant no more than an interval between two political regimes. At that time, political science largely worked with the phenomena of change in retrospect, attempting to get a lesson from historical experience ex-post. According to Buden, interest in the future was not significantly present, and the transition did not necessarily lead to democracy, but also to an even more authoritarian regime (Buden gives the example of Chile, where Allende was succeeded in power by Pinochet). As stated by Buden, the late 1980s brought a change in the understanding of the concept of transition. Since that time, the term transition has been almost exclusively associated with the so-called post-communist societies. Its goal has been to change those societies in such a way as to enable them to get access to the global capitalist system of Western liberal democracy. It is no longer a descript-

16 There exists, indeed, a widespread opinion in the East-Central European countries, that countries such as Slovakia or Czechia, but also Greece for instance, became only colonies of “Brussels” or of “Berlin” (As far as I know, this view was mostly popularized in the Czech and Slovak setting by Ilona Švihlíková (Švihlíková, 2015). It is not unproblematic and often misused by certain (not only extremist) political parties and popular movements but is still built on certain serious problems such as democratic deficits of Brussels’s administration, the Franco-German political leadership, German economic power or lingering income inequalities between “old” and “new” EU-countries.
tive or a past-oriented discipline, but rather a normative and future-oriented discipline that has turned into an ideology. In this sense, Boris Buden ironically describes the time after the change in 1989 as the time “when freedom needed children” (Buden, 2009, p. 34). He gets upset over the post-communist situation where those who proved their political maturity by overthrowing the authoritarian regimes needed “the” education in democracy as if they were some little kids. Certain problematizations of Buden’s analyses should be allowed, though, since without that “educational support” from the West and without the vision of becoming part of the European Union, the civil societies in East-Central Europe would be even weaker today, and the comeback of the authoritarian and anti-Western wave would have been much easier. The anti-democratic political underground – both left-wing and right-wing in nature – has been quite strong throughout the years. Perhaps we would need a more balanced picture, for all those changes are not only about (neoliberal) economics. Nevertheless, the “metaphors” from post-communist jargon, as noted by Buden (“democratic education, exams in democracy, school of democracy, a democracy that still needs diapers, that grows and matures and may be still in its infancy is taking its first steps or, a democracy that suffers from childhood diseases [Orig. in German, transl. Ľ.D.]” (Buden, 2009, p. 34)) were repeatedly misused (e.g., for disguising neoliberal policies). We can conclude now that they often contributed less to the flourishing of those democracies than to undermining them, this process being accelerated by the economic crises of 2008-2009.

The most important part of Buden’s argument is accompanied by the manipulatively disseminated arguments of determinism notoriously familiar to Eastern Europeans under the name of historical determinism, which was a crucial part of the communist ideology. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss similarities between Stalinist and neoliberal aberrations in detail, although a few more words will be said later. Nor can we analyze the success of neoliberal ideology in other parts of the world or the relatively successful defense of the welfare state, especially in Northern Europe. Nevertheless, the world-constitutive aspects of the liberal utopia (Árnason 1993, p. 186)\(^\text{17}\), indeed even its treatment of its own raison d’être shows certain similarities with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, the former consisting in this very “blind” service to the new historical necessity (such as unceasing efforts to convince the general public that the less the state’s intervention, the greater their wealth and happiness). At this point, let me note that I am not talking about the opportunists such as “new ideologues,” who have been doing this for the sake of raking in

more money, nor about the turncoats, who have claimed their adherence to (neo)liberalism out of fear of losing their privileged positions at universities or in public service. I am talking about those many “captive minds” that accepted this new historical necessity as the truth.

Man of the East

In his autobiographical book *The Memory Chalet*, Tony Judt (Judt, 2011) revived a debate about the work *The Captive Mind* by Polish writer, poet, academic and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz written in the 1950s, where the author attempts to explain the allure of Stalinism to intellectuals. Judt identifies such captive minds among George W. Bush’s supporters, or, relevant to our line of argument, among admirers of the free market and the “Washington consensus.” He describes those people as unable to offer or even see another alternative, quoting M. Thatcher’s famous slogan “there is no alternative.” Like Buden, he does not avoid comparison with the Communist ideology, and claims:

“[T]he market” – “dialectical materialism” – is just an abstraction: at once ultra-rational (its argument trumps all) and the acme of unreason (it is not open to question). It has its true believers – mediocre thinkers by contrast with the founding fathers, but influential withal; its fellow travelers – who may privately doubt the claims of the dogma but see no alternative to preaching it; and its victims, many of whom in the US especially have dutifully swallowed their pill and proudly proclaim the virtues of a doctrine whose benefits they will never see.

Judt, 2011, p. 179

Jóhann Árnason provides a very plausible interpretation of such similarities between neoliberalism and the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, codified by Stalin. In his commentary on Jan Patočka’s essay entitled ‘Super-civilization’ and its inner conflict’ (Patočka, 1996), Árnason states that Patočka’s originality consists in his having been the first to see modernity as a civilizational paradox, that modernity is both more and less than traditional civilization. This means that modern civilization, characterized as “a rational super-civilization,” aims, on the one hand, at the “exodus from civilization,” that is, one that

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18 See more about the phenomena of “turncoats” (in Slovakia) in Larson (2013), especially the chapter “Civility and Crisis in the Slovak Public Sphere” (pp. 65-103).

19 In Patočka’s vocabulary, the term “supercivilization” means modernity.
transcends the particularism of older civilizations by rationalizing all areas of social life (Arnason, 2003, p. 135). In this respect, the most explicit definition of super-civilizational radicalism emphasizes the radical attempt and aspiration to make rationality the key to answering every question in life. On the other hand, while super-civilization attempts to offer the same world-constitutive capacity as older civilizations, it is ultimately incapable of doing so.

According to Patočka, a moderate super-civilization is capable of successfully coping with this paradox by relinquishing claims of absolute superiority to, and autonomy from, previous civilizations and acknowledging its partial dependence upon them. In other words, such moderation consists in relativizing the domain of validity/authority in reason in order to make room for other sources of meaning, which is tantamount to accepting that the hybrid character of modern civilization relies upon both modern and pre-modern elements. However, for Patočka (as Árnason explains further), there exists a radical variant of super-civilization that strives to overcome the paradox of super-civilization – the inability to provide the aforementioned world-constitutive capacity and, therefore, give an ultimate answer to the question of the meaning of life – by means of total rational restructuring of social life. In other words, the super-civilization simply replaces traditional religion with the modern secular cult of reason; absolute authority in all spheres of life is thus transferred from a supernatural deity to human reason. Such a move, however, in no way overcomes the dogmatic self-enclosed character of older civilizations, but merely reproduces it in a different form (Patočka, 1996, p. 255). The result is ultimately self-defeating in that super-civilization is unable to fulfill its aim of distinguishing itself as superior to all previous civilizations, but merely reinforces its status as one among others (Árnason, 2003, pp. 135–136).

For our ambition to explain why so many intellectuals so easily and uncritically adopted neoliberalism, it is important to note Árnason’s commentary on the metamorphosis of radicalism in the modern age. In his words,

Communism does indeed belong to the history of super-civilizational radicalism and, Patočka’s whole concept doubtlessly originated primarily as an attempt to understand and classify communist phenomena; nevertheless, a radical super-civilization is not just identical to communism, and it does not follow from Patočka’s argument that communism necessarily represents its definitive or last possible form. Rather, at the beginning of the 21st century, the hypothesis was posited that an ideological amalgam of market fundamentalism (combining many resources which need not belong solely to the category of radicalism per se) was established as a new form of super-civilizational radicalism. It is
a continuation – albeit in a very selective way – of the heritage of classical utilitarianism [Orig. in Czech, translation – L.D.].

ÁRNASON, 2010, p. 44

The fact that the impact of neoliberalism on Eastern Europe is stronger than that on the Western part of the continent deserves attention; the story is, however, multifarious. What is more, the situation in the USA, the birthplace of neoliberalism, looks just as bad as in East-Central Europe in some parts of the country and, in certain aspects, even worse today. For the EU, the consequence is obvious – the reconfiguration of the EU economic “core” and “periphery.” In this sense (with a few exceptions – “enclaves” of economic prosperity outside of the core), the further away a country is from the central part of Germany (more specifically, from the three major German federal states today – in the economic sense – Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and Hessen), the poorer it is.20 Southern Europe in particular is economically much closer to Eastern Europe than it was a few decades ago (Ther, 2016). Moreover, what is new and shocking is how some regions of formerly rich and powerful countries like Great Britain or France are impoverished. Back in the early 1990s, it would have been hard to find East-Central Europeans who could imagine such a future scenario.

But let us revert to the problem of East-Central European intellectuals. Impressed by East-Central European history, Tony Judt (quoting Czeslaw Miłosz) draws our attention to a certain idiosyncrasy of Eastern European intellectuals. For [Czeslaw] Miłosz, “the man of the East cannot take Americans seriously because they have never undergone the experiences that teach men how relative their judgments and thinking habits are.” This is doubtless so and explains the continuing skepticism of the East European in the face of Western innocence. But there is nothing innocent about Western (and Eastern) commentators’ voluntary servitude before the new pan-orthodoxy. Many of them know better but prefer not to raise their heads above the parapet. In this sense at least, they have something truly in common with the intellectuals of the Communist age. One hundred years after his birth, fifty-seven years after the publication of his seminal essay [The Captive Mind – L.D.], Miłosz’s indictment of the servile intellectual rings truer than ever: “his chief characteristic is his fear of thinking for himself.”

JUDT 2010, pp. 180-181

20 Naturally, the global aspect should be included as well, however, the logic of neoliberalism and the ensuing divergence between center and periphery, seems to be similar everywhere, see for instance (Robinson 2004).
At this point, both Miłosz and Judt are dead wrong. By and large, East-Central European intellectuals have not really learned much from their historical experience regarding the relativity of our judgments and thinking habits. As an example, while some intellectuals are launching witch-hunts against the current archenemies of the West, China and Russia, others are now “crazy” about China and Russia with equal strength, attempting to convince the crowds that the West is unjust, paternalistic, decadent, etc. To clarify my point, what I have in mind is not an acceptable (and even necessary) plurality of opinions, but a similar narrow-minded, militantly passionate attitude as that expressed by neoliberals, Marxist-Leninists, or Bush’s supporters. A balanced view on the “world issues” is rather scarce – even in the ranks of intellectuals and university professors.21

We have started this essay with Milan Kundera, so let us also end it with his observations. He shares his own memory of the time shortly after 1989, when he was allowed to visit Czechoslovakia again. He concludes from his debates with the Czechs that they “Orwellized” the past Communist regime, not being able to see any form of pluralism, any divergencies, simply any “windows” in the totalitarian picture of that regime, which, as documented by the cultural creativity of the 1960s, does not reflect the reality.22 The danger of such reductionism is that it very easily ends up in facile moralism, which calls for “tribunal” and “trial.”23 It is not difficult to connect such facile moralism and the “Orwellization” of a regime as another piece of the “transitological” puzzle or to use it “interculturally” and see how it is misused by the recurring campaign against different cultures and civilizations. Although this study has not steered the discussion of Árna-

21 And the situation is likely to deteriorate with a brain drain on the one hand and a lack of high-quality education and reliable authorities on the other as a result of neoliberal policies and depleted state budgets.

22 If we add the Slovak aspect, even during normalization, the period following the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies (1969–1989), predominantly seen as a time of (cultural) stagnation, we can find the incredible quality of artistic work, especially in literature, as claimed e.g., by Martin M. Šimečka (a journalist and the son of the above-mentioned Milan Šimečka, also a former dissident, i.e., someone who is very critical of the former regime. He is currently an influential public figure) (Šimečka, 2017). There is no room for the discussion of the differences in the societal development in the Western and Eastern parts of the former Czechoslovakia, but in general the period in Slovakia is considered – paradoxically (but not unproblematically) – as one of the best in the Slovak history; Cf. (Pekník, 2006, pp. 42-46).

23 Kundera then draws a long list of prominent artists who were – at a certain moment of their lives – adherents of other than dominant ideologies and, not uncommonly, of problematic ones such as Fascism or Leninism. However, Kundera pleads for a distinction between their lives and the quality and importance of their works, which are often overshadowed – from the contemporary point of view – by their partisanship and theoretical affinities, as well as present-day ideological trials.
son’s work towards the issue of intercultural and intercivilizational encounters and conflicts, Árnason’s hermeneutical-phenomenological and historic-sociological approach itself is very helpful in avoiding such reductionism. More specifically, his pluralistic theory of civilization (Árnason, 2003) and modernity (Árnason, 2020) would be the proper start for further argumentation.

In conclusion, let us come back to the man of the East, as he was christened by Czesław Miłosz. If in certain periods such reasonable East-European intellectuals had really existed – at least hypothetically, Jóhann P. Árnason should be suggested as the prime example. Such identification might be in many regards artificial (for one thing, he does not come from Eastern Europe, and for another, he hasn’t spent most of his career in Czechoslovakia). But still, I would claim – without an ambition of being right – that his interaction with Prague and the Czechoslovakian and East-Central European context may indicate that Árnason also falls under the description offered by Jonathan L. Larson: “In sum, the Slovak (and, to a less determined degree, East Central European) discourses of critical thinking explored in this book [Critical Thinking in Slovakia after Socialism – Ľ.D.] suggest an ideal of life lived in deep reflective awareness of history, as well as moral obligations to society” (Larson 2017, p. 235). The question of whether there really exists a difference between Czech and Slovak understanding of that “ideal of life” is secondary here (as is the difference between Slovak and other East-Central European countries), since Prague was and probably still will be the very intellectual “heart” of the (to a certain degree still existing) common “Czechoslovakian” culture. It is hard to tell how intellectually independent Slovakia really is. What is more important, however, is that both Johann Árnason’s work, with his “historizing approach” in social theory, and his entire life, fulfil and demonstrate that ideal. In this regard, he is the Praguer and East(-Central) European that Czesław Miłosz might have in mind.24

References


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