
Paulina Bren’s book is an ambitious attempt to present a new interpretation of the Czechoslovak normalization era (1969–1989) through the prism of small screen serials. It was generally well reviewed, earned a number of prestigious awards such as the Council of European Studies Book Award for 2012, and was short listed for the ASEEES Vucinich Book Prize. Despite the title, the author’s ambition was not to write a new chapter on media or film studies, but to understand power relations in the loosely defined “culture of communism.” Therefore, the chronology of the book follows the logic of political history instead of the history of Czechoslovak television serials, which surpasses the normalization era on both ends. Bren bases her analysis not only on the actual television serials (in particular *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman*, *The Youngest of the Hamr Dynasty*, *The Man at the Town Hall*, and *The Woman Behind the Counter*) but also on thorough research of television archives. These sources clearly testify that one of the main “lessons” of 1968 for the post-invasion leadership of the normalization period was the recognition that television played a key role in the political mobilization of the Prague Spring. For the acceptance of the new social contract, control over and mastery of this tool was essential, but by no means easy. What made television broadcasting during the Prague Spring so attractive was its novelty, interactivity, and the spontaneity of live debates in the era when the public showed vivid interest in political life. The communist leadership wanted to preserve the communicative role of the TV, but it had to change the content of the communication.

According to Paulina Bren, the TV serials managed to successfully “normalize the normalization” by transferring the world of politics from the public to the private domain (149). In her analysis, she relies on the work of Lauren Berlant and her term “privatized citizenship,” by which she refers to the logic of the American media world of the Reagan era in which public life was sacrificed in favor of “simultaneously lived private worlds” (Berlant 1997). Similarly, Bren claims—and in this she differs from the well-known thesis of Ladislav Holý (1996)—the normalization regime did not attempt to establish a non-political private realm but, quite to the contrary, it tried to politicize the private sphere. The serials remained political in nature, but the political content was integrated into the stories of private and family life, while the public sphere lost its importance, which in itself was an important message for viewers. The values and behavior that the regime intended to praise or punish were played out in the serials in the private sphere and transmitted to the horizontal world of sofas in private living rooms. Such a domestication of politics was a method of reckoning with the heritage of the Prague Spring. In the example of the TV serial *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman*, the author shows that the official interpretation of 1968 was a one of collective mass hysteria or collective mental illness, which had to be cured by the panacea of familial happiness. Looking at the serial *The Woman Behind the Counter*, she further develops this thesis by describing the radical increase in the importance of the role of women on the small screen. Yet the TV serials do not portray emancipated women as equal to men, as was the case in the fifties. Rather they reinforced the traditional role of women as the caretakers of family values. It was the role of the women to lead their men away from the public realm of mass hysteria and dangerous desires and into the world of normalized pleasures.
The attempt to link TV serials with the broader “culture” of normalization is the strongest point of the book. Some of the analysis of the serials as such, however, remains behind the research in the field, not only in its width and depth but also in terms of its methodology and theory (e.g., Reifová 2002). Bren uses the serials as tools to document her view of the normalization era. Combined with her attempt to present a neat, understandable story with a witty argument, this approach to the programs often results in selective source work and simplistic interpretations of the serials. For example, she has to leave aside a number of historical serials that aestheticized (male) manual labor (e.g., Jakub the Glassmaker) because this idea does not correspond neatly with her thesis on privatized citizenship. The structural analysis that she uses is an excellent tool for uncovering the “webs of meanings” of the normalization serials, but not sufficient for what Bren is trying to achieve: to explain the normalization society.

Bren tries to bypass this problem by supplying the reader with an ample amount of spectatorship data. Yet this data is hard to interpret. What for instance does it mean that 90% of viewers watched the serial? In the planned economy of entertainment, there was no competition, so the figure is only surprising in showing that some people did watch the classical concert on the only other channel. But even if we admit that most people watched the serials, we still need to know what this “watching” meant. Is it really true that the spectators identified with the serial heroes and therefore automatically identified with the normalization? Bren does not provide any evidence for this, because her book remains trapped in the ethnographical view of “Czechs” as an abstract concept and lacks the tools of social analysis. However, it should not be forgotten that society under normalization remained a society, i.e. a sum of various individuals, groups, and interests. There were people who deeply cared about the serials (and wrote letters that are now in the television archives), but there were others who laughed at them and went to see a football match or left for the night shift. If we follow the logic of the book, it remains a mystery why a significant part of the population in 1989 stood up from the “private citizenship” of their sofas, switched the TV off, and took to the streets to demonstrate their public citizenship.

Paulina Bren’s book is a bargain. For the price of one book on normalization serials, the reader gets another one about the dissident movement for free. Yet it does not take long for one to discover that it was not such a bargain after all. Bren detours repeatedly for a number of pages from the TV serials (from chapter 4 onwards) to engage in lengthy and highly partisan attacks against parts of the dissident movement. Her delegitimization of dissident discourse on normalization was probably meant as a way of creating space for her own interpretation of the era, but the reader is often left wondering how these detours relate to the main subject of the book.

Bren questions the moral high ground of the dissidents by claiming that “the dissident world was as susceptible as the official sphere to shifting ethical categories” (157). The original sin of the dissident Charta 77 movement was that many of its signatories were former communists. “Among the Charter’s ranks,” says Bren, “were not only former communists active during the Stalinist 1950s but also reform communists who had failed the public when it counted most. It had been a Federal Assembly filled with the reform communists who rati- fied, with an overwhelming 94% of the vote, the decision for Soviet occupying troops to remain ‘indefinitely’ in Czechoslovakia” (99). This quote illustrates (besides some additional factual errors) the way Bren treats the subject of dissidence by freely arranging the facts and discursive levels to support her thesis. It is, of course, true that Charta 77 was signed by many