
A Hundred Years of *The Czech Question*

Editorial Introduction

Certain jubilees are productive not only because they consolidate historical consciousness, but also because they consolidate societal systems. Indeed, the commemoration of the hundred years since the publication of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's *Česká otázka* (The Czech Question, Prague 1895), an unusually influential book in the Czech context at the time of its appearance and still stimulating today, brings us back to some basic semantic centres in the life of Czech society – to the problems of national identity, political orientation, cultural self-confidence, moral self-reflection, national character, historical self-understanding etc. General forms of the nation's political culture, formations of the *raison d'Etat*, value hierarchy and the like continue to formulate around such books, and are equally important to understanding that culture's concrete historical-social expressions and their transformations.

The fact that *The Czech Question*, when carefully read, does not strike the reader as antiquated, stale and uninteresting indicates that it touches upon issues which have not ceased to interest and excite us. Masaryk undoubtedly had a strongly developed sense of the deeper layers of the crisis which the modern European faced. Everything he wrote was a reaction to this crisis. Nevertheless, he also proposed possible positive – i.e., humanistic and democratic – solutions and, what is more, committed himself as a politician to practical endeavours which were to transform his ideas into reality. Masaryk sought to see the so-called Czech question, the recurring problems of the non-pragmatic bases of the Czech present and future, in more general European and universal contexts. In his opinion, it is only in this wider context that Czech history attains its full meaning. Masaryk's knowledge of Europe, Russia and the United States helped him not only to see the Czechs and Czech political life critically, from the outside, but also to formulate a well-founded, positive political programme for a small nation from its „historical core“. Masaryk's pursuit of a global view, his contemplation of the individuality of historical events through the prism of suprahistorical ideas and his analysis of national life in the light of supranational – i.e., general human – principles, are what make this work inspirational even today, and not only for the Czech reader.

From this point of view, the decision made by the editorial board of *The Czech Sociological Review* to devote the first issue this year to Masaryk's *The Czech Question* was not an act of reverence, intended merely to supplement the series of commemorative acts which have taken place or are still to come this year.

We consider Masaryk's *The Czech Question* to be one of the fundamental works in the integration of the Czech ethnicum in the European context. At the same time, this very fact also means that it is not possible to deal with this work uncritically and eulogically, without regard for the experience acquired over the past hundred years. In the collection of articles presented here, the reader will therefore also find studies which criticise some aspects of Masaryk's thought or which interpret it in less traditional contexts. Masaryk – an intellectual examining the European situation at the end of the 19th century from an unusual perspective, i.e., from the complementary perspectives of positivistic science and the religiously-oriented philosophy of individual responsibility – could not ignore the internal difficulties, contradictions and dangers threatening Czech

society. It is interesting to note how critically he looked at Czech situation of the time, in spite of the undoubtedly positive signs of economic and social development of that society at the end of the 19th century. He certainly registered them; what he was worried about, however, was the intellectual and moral quality of Czech life at that time. And it is his very capacity to see the hidden risks behind the contemporary positive picture of society that makes Masaryk so stimulating for us today. This combination of critical opinion both from the outside and in – aiming at the formulation of a philosophically-based programme for one of the small Central European nations – is an exhortation for us to discuss *The Czech Question* within the pages of *The Czech Sociological Review*. Due to the fact that we consider *The Czech Question* to be one of the fundamental studies aiding the integration of the Czech ethnicum into European thought and life, we are publishing the following articles in English. Thus we seek to contribute to the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Masaryk's book.

For Czech readers too, reflection on this work is, in our opinion, important as the new Czech state, its politicians and citizens, have to rethink the long-term programme for the country and redefine its geographical position.

The multifaceted questions dealt with by the contributors to this issue essentially reflect the richness of ideas of the author whom we are commemorating. Certain themes are worthy of note, both for their general relevance and their parallel treatment by several authors. First: how is Masaryk's book, upon which we are all reflecting, to be understood? To reiterate what is pointed out by Otto Urban, Miloš Havelka, Eva Broklová and, indirectly, by Ernest Gellner, Masaryk's aim was not to reconstruct history in a historiographical sense. Rather, he had in mind a philosophy of history and sought to unveil the specific role of Czechs in history's general 'programme'. It is also possible, as M. Havelka points out, to describe Masaryk's book as a „special thematisation of history“ in E. Nolte's sense. Masaryk's aim, however, is not only to understand Czech history, but also to identify permanent, recurring positive motives of activities in the Czech community through the ages. He is concerned with the search for continuity and „Czechness“, which would – at the same time – function as a legitimation for political action.

The question is, then, what are the positive elements of this „Czechness“. It is on this point, of course, that the authors diverge. E. Gellner does not consider it possible to accept the concept of something permanent that defines an ethnicum during all phases of its existence. Other contributors try to salvage something of this continuity.

This issue is connected with another significant motive, namely Czech history's inclusion within the great European history. There are two aspects of this motive: the factual and the normative. As to the former, we shall probably join Masaryk in a revival of inquiry into our links with the intellectual development of the great European countries as into our contribution to this development. This is a much needed kind of cultural geopolitics. The second aspect is no less important. Here, as both M. Havelka and O. Urban point out, Masaryk answers the Czech question posed by Gordon Schauer: will the Czechs be able to bring some significant contribution to the pantheon of humanity? Essentially in the spirit of J. G. Herder, Masaryk expressed his belief in the mission of individual nations in the orchestra of all those forming humankind. Even if today we were to attempt to base the relationship between universalism and plurality of values and lifestyles pursued by individual nations on assumptions than differ to those made by Masaryk, we would end up with similar results. Masaryk tried to reconcile European universalism with nationalism. In this context, most of the contributors stress, E. Brok-

lová particularly emphatically, Masaryk's merit in linking the Czech question to the European one. In his studies on democracy and its significance in both remote and recent Czech history, Masaryk reacted vigorously to the European intellectual problems of his time, and his persistent appeal that Czechs should participate in the discussion on democracy in the European context, remains to this day a positive challenge. It should, however, be added that such a stress on democracy did not appear explicitly in *The Czech Question*, but in its sequel, i.e., in *The Making of a State*.

The third issue we emphasise is Masaryk's realism and his critique of historicism. In our collection of articles, this theme is dealt with in an original way by both Jaroslav Střítecký and Jiří Musil, while Ernest Gellner and Eva Broklová deal with it indirectly. The most frequently quoted sentence from *The Czech Question* in the articles is the one which states that priority should not be given to the evolution of things, but to the things themselves. Even if the comments – e.g., Havelka's – stressing the platonic roots of Masaryk's understanding of history are undoubtedly correct, it would be interesting to reflect upon other possible interpretations of Masaryk's realism.

A non-traditional and, in the Czech milieu, less frequent interpretation is applied in J. Střítecký, M. Havelka's and J. Musil's comments on Masaryk's theory concerning the crisis of modern European culture. Havelka and Střítecký consider Masaryk's ideas to constitute a basically conservative perception of the general crisis of modern times. Havelka sees this thesis corroborated both in Masaryk's appeal to revive religion and in his stress on the religious aspect of the Czech question. J. Musil also points to the importance of religion to Masaryk's thought, linking *The Czech Question* with his essays on *Modern Man and Religion*. Ernest Gellner's contribution on the wider consequences of Masaryk's philosophy can be considered the most original. In his view, Masaryk's concept of history as the work of Providence – which should, of course, be aided, but which can also be relied on – poses many risks. If Providence plans evolution from theocracy to democracy, then all those who are on the side of Providence act in harmony with „History“. Therefore they are strong. Strength and truth are linked : he who is on the side of truth will win. But what if it so happens that those representing historical truth, i.e., democracy, fail? As they did, for example, in Munich? Shock follows, with the consequence that the community searches for a better expression of historical truth and for alternative external support. According to Gellner, this happened to the Czechs after World War II. Marxism and the alliance with the Soviet Union became the new support.

Leaving aside the question as to whether this pro-Soviet orientation was accepted by most Czechs, we find in Gellner's account a rational sociological core. Although Masaryk stressed individual responsibility, in referring to Providence, he contributed to the exaggerated Czech reliance on history. Thus, doubtless unintentionally, he strengthened one of the features in Czech behavioural patterns that Gellner – adopting D. Riesman's term – calls „otherdirectedness“. As J. Musil mentions, however, there are other interpretations of the same phenomena: the concepts of both synergy and complementarity. Human beings can and should co-operate with Providence, just as they should combine the rationality of modern science and economy with individual ethical responsibility for their actions. In this interpretation of Masaryk's thought, the apparently incompatible elements – rationality and morality – can be considered two complementary pillars of European civilisation.

Miloš Havelka, Jiří Musil

THE CZECH QUESTION ?



THAT IS THE QUESTION...

