

**Milan Otáhal: Opozice, moc, společnost 1969-1989 (Opposition, Power, Society 1969-1989).**

Praha, Maxdorf 1994, 124 p.

The study is divided into four chapters themselves indications of the main thrust of the author's evaluation of the opposition movement. The first, *The beginnings of „normalisation“ and the first phase of the opposition*, is an analysis of the activities and demands of the groups active till about 1972. The second chapter describes the circumstances leading to the rise of Charter 77, the implications of this event and the new elements distinguishing it from opposition groups of the previous period. The next part, *The break in the development of the dissident movement and society* focuses on the late 80s, on changes in the USSR and the consequent weakening of the Czechoslovak normalisation regime as it lost its ability to manage the expansion of the opposition's influence on the people's thoughts and attitudes. The conclusion then concentrates indepth on the events of November and December 1989.

The manifestation of disagreement at the Soviet invasion increased at the same time as the Dubček leadership overstepped the line of tolerable compromise. I would not, however, identify myself fully with the author's postulation that there was no break in the opposition development until Gustáv Husák was elected leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ). However, it is the author himself who shows convincingly that there was no significant difference between Dubček's and Husák's politics.

In the period 1969-1970, there was a notable shift in both the representation of the opposition's opinions and in their strength. The mass actions rising from the wide population strata engagement continued to fade away. Characteristic features of the entire opposition of the late sixties and early seventies were the belief in socialism and its values as well as the confidence in the serious contradiction between the normalisation politics and the genuine socialistic principles, the latter being vehemently discredited by the former. In opposition to this standard as represented by, for example, the Socialist Movement of Czecho-

slovak Citizens (Socialistické hnutí československých občanů), remarkable exceptions could be found. While the initiatives embodying these professed socialism, their practical programmes were quite different from the traditionally socialistic ones. The first of them is the Ten Point Manifesto (Manifest Deset bodů) published by a small group of citizens on 21. 8. 1969. It was fundamentally different from anything else at that time, due to the great weight placed on human and civic rights and on the possibility of „non-political practical functioning“ with the aim of self-protection from the system. This document was signed by many people connected with the further development of the opposition movement (Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík, Rudolf Battěk).

It seems legitimate that the author pays attention to the appearance of perhaps the most remarkable ideas on the Czechoslovak scene of that time: the Czechoslovak Movement for Democratic Socialism (Československé hnutí za demokratický socialismus). „A Preliminary Thesis of Open Socialism“ (Předběžné teze otevřeného socialismu), an outline for future development, ushered in a fundamentally new moment in our political way of thinking by introducing a completely different conception of socialism: socialism is neither a concrete vision nor a rigid doctrine, but merely a method – an attitude assuming understanding and tolerance. It consists in and aims for the „co-operation of individuals“.

The atmosphere of the post-1972 period was not favourable for opposition activities: while the opposition was not completely destroyed by the intervention of authority, it was fundamentally shaken by it. It is in these early stages that the author distinguishes two factions of the opposition movement, applying this dichotomy throughout the entire ensuing development. Thus he contrasts Mandler's „realistic“ or „constructive“ group with Havel's „radical“ group.

The „realistic“ group – embryo of the later „Democratic Initiative“ (Demokratická iniciativa) – remained in the field of traditional „political“ politics which sought to act within the range of existing political possibilities and on the basis of an overall knowledge and understanding of tradition as well as the present

state of society. This differentiation serves as the starting point for further description of the origin and evaluation of Charter 77, Havel's conception of „apolitical“ politics becoming an essential part of its concept. The origin as well as the nature of Charter 77 was simultaneously stimulated by its originators' incentive to defend basic human rights. It was their violation, the effort to prevent their being violated and to secure the general respect accorded them that was the main goal of Charter 77. It avoided becoming an organisation, insisting on its fixed status and its particular goal postulated in advance as well as on a conditional acceptance of new members. Its aim was not to be an opposition political power intent on changing the political system. Instead of traditional political methods, Charter 77 made moral demands of the party, state authorities and ordinary citizens, who all were to reject their lives of „one kind of thought and another kind of action“ and start to „live in truth“. The leader of the „realistic“ faction saw Charter 77 and its demands as „moral radicalism“. Given its distance from the problems facing the majority of people, it could not count on stronger public support.

The most controversial moment of the entire book is Otáhal's evaluation of Charter 77: it is an unsatisfactory evaluation of the well-known fact that during the totalitarian regime, every display of independence on the line laid out by the political authority acquired a political connotation, even if under normal conditions it would have born no connection with politics of any kind. The domain of politics in such a system is much more extensive and includes independent cultural activities as well as attempts to think and behave independently in the various spheres of life. Similarly, the behaviour of any individual who refuses to be humiliated by the regime forcing him or her to live against his/her beliefs, thus has its own political importance. Václav Havel believed such individual human decisions to be the most important prerequisite of the system change as they derived the social crisis from the crisis of the individual.

Thus we come to the second reason allowing us to take Charter 77 as the manifestation of a political act. Besides its mediated political

importance, I think it is also possible to claim its direct importance. This is clearly shown in the November 1977 essay by Professor Patocka, which M. Otáhal quotes. The human rights which see commitment as the acknowledgement of something „confining, not criticisable or taboo“ retain a political dimension which cannot be ignored. Basic civic rights were acknowledged by western political thought, not as the expression of utilitarian political calculations, but as a claim derived from the conviction that the world is submitted to the principle making all individuals equal; thus, in order to protect their legitimate interests everybody must also be equal in terms of the political power which has illusively risen from their decision.

On the other hand, it is possible to agree with the author's assertion that Charter 77 did not always avoid slipping into the role of the „conscience of society“. After all, it is obvious that there was really no direct way for Charter 77 to overcome the totalitarian regime. Neither, however, was there a way for other opposition attempts such as the Democratic Initiative – as the author himself acknowledges, if in a less careful and elaborated manner.

Although Charter 77 was not accepted by all protagonists of the opposition, the alternative organisations were only to come into being ten years later – at the time somewhat problematically characterised by M. Otáhal as a „break in the development of the dissident movement“. Obviously the development in the USSR subsequent to M. Gorbatschov's rise to power and the commencement of his perestrojka, and after the consequent, albeit highly troublesome „liberalisation“ of the regime in ČSSR coupled with the growing economic problems and a stagnation, created new, more favourable conditions for the opposition's activities. The new petitions, requests and letters from citizens' groups addressed to the party and state bodies were emerging, while the number of people signing them was increasing; new independent organisations came into being, just as the number of demonstrations grew. Naturally, new conceptions were emerging – from among those which Otáhal emphasises, the most important is the Democratic Initiative

project of 1987, this according to his basic differentiation of the opposition. Although its statement was signed by Václav Havel and the other leaders of Charter 77, it was the action of a so-called realistic group. However, when the author talks about the break in the development of the dissident movement, he necessarily accepts the views of the Democratic Initiative. Indeed, the expression „break“ is not an appropriate application to the Democratic Initiative itself – at best it functions as a characterisation of the overall expansion of the opposition, thus being used in a quantitative rather than a qualitative sense.

Although there are immense differences between the Democratic Initiative and Charter 77, it is questionable to interpret and present their coexistence as a contest between naive moral radicals and wise cautious realists. The Democratic Initiative's fundamental interest was not the individual, his/her rights and moral dilemma, but the political sphere. According to the Democratic Initiative, the solution to the crisis was not a moral, but a political one. Thus the Democratic Initiative was intent on the democratisation of public life, the liberation of rigid centralism, an extended space for all kinds of independent activities. These changes were to occur gradually in a period of transition which should last, according to the September 1989 statement, until free elections were held.

Surprising in the Democratic Initiative's documents is the strong accent on the nation. The conception of Charter 77, based on the rights of the individual and his or her basic values, was probably closer to modern democratic society than the opposition's intended.

There were also other independent initiatives distinguished by striking political engagement – in the original sense – such as the Movement for Civic Freedom (Hnutí za občanskou svobodu), established in October 1988, or the Club for Socialist Reconstruction – Revival (Klub za socialistickou přestavbu – Obroda), whose programme was published in December 1988. The manifesto published by HOS (Movement for Civic Freedom), *Democracy for Everybody* (Demokracie pro všechny), responded to the changing situation, already pro-

posing possibilities for real political activity. With Václav Havel's considerable participation in the formulation of this programme, evidence of the main faction's mutual approach is to be found there. In contrast with HOS, the Revival associating the reform communists was much more linked to the concrete political vision and the ideal of democratic socialism.

Besides its programme not corresponding to its time of origin, the Revival also failed to establish the right strategy. While it maintained its connections with the other independent groups, it sought contact with the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) at the same time, thus dramatically damaging its ability to act properly. This, together with the quite high average age of its members and the fixed character of their past, lead to its isolation.

More new organisations were also being established such as the Independent Peace Association (Nezávislé mírové sdružení), the John Lennon Peace Club (Mírový klub Johna Lennona) and the Czech Children (České děti), thus completing the spectrum. All created their mainly generational profiles as an expression of their mistrust in ideals of the older generations.

The further course of events – up until November 1989 – is seen by Otáhal as the encounter with the „realistic“ and the „radical“ conception. The author embarks upon a more detailed analysis of the opinions expressed during the preparation and evaluation of the 21. 8. 1989 demonstration. Unfortunately, no opposition groups in ecclesiastic and artistic spheres are included in his work: only swift and marginal references made. The Christian groups in particular should not be omitted from the opposition movement – indeed it is hard to imagine it without them.

From the perspective of political sciences, the chief interest in Otáhal's book is the analysis of the „non-political“ and „political“ conceptions of politics and their practical expression and, in terms of mediation, the author's conception of what is the entire content of politics in general and especially politics in a totalitarian, undemocratic system.

*Jan Dobeš*