
A Belated Education

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There is a part of me that wishes I could say that I recognised the importance of the Prague Spring and of its suppression clearly and decisively at the time. I certainly knew about the latter, clearly remembering my mother telling me about it the moment the news came on the radio. She did so with a touch of irritation as I held leftist views about British politics, based on a mild form of socialism leading me to join various protests, most obviously those against the Vietnam war. I certainly did not seek to justify the Warsaw Pact, and I was not close to much of the cultural radicalism of the time—had in fact been rather bemused by the slogans found when passing through Paris in late May. Nonetheless, this eighteen-year old British student simply did not know much about the communist bloc, let alone about the details of the Czechoslovak case. The comment of Milan Kundera quoted by the editor of this symposium is apposite, even though I already lacked any sense of lyricism in such political views as I possessed. Stephen Spender made exactly the same points in his excellent *The Year of the Young Rebels* [Spender 1969]. The relative lack of Western interest in and knowledge of Czechoslovakia is a dreadful fact, but it is one that ought to be acknowledged.

I like to think, however, that I became quite well educated in the sociology of Central Europe—that is, in the workings of a whole world, one that went well beyond the events this issue of this journal memorialises. Four immediate influences were important. The first was listening to a series of lectures on ‘Modern Ideologies’, given by Ernest Gellner at the London School of Economics in the academic year 1970–1971. Marxism featured heavily here of course, but so too did comments on the different fates of particular countries in the socialist bloc. I remain grateful to those lectures for they helped me find my way into comparative historical sociology. A second influence that then followed was the discovery of Raymond Aron’s sociology of liberal capitalism and state socialism. Despite my admiration for his work I must still have considered him somehow to the right, for I remember mild surprise a little later when a young Polish philosopher, exiled for his participation in Solidarity, rushed across the Common Room in the London School of Economics to present Aron with his Solidarity lapel pin, saying in the most moving manner that he was revered in East Central Europe for having

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told the truth. The third influence was simply—at last—immersion in the history of Central Europe, of communism, and of the very different oppositions in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. These three factors in combination most certainly changed my work: liberalism mattered, so to speak, above all, and it rested on pluralism, on power being in separate sets of hands. I should say clearly that I do not think that lesson was generally learnt: to the contrary, the academic world of the 1970s and early 1980s (at least in Britain) remained very much in the grips of marxisant ideas, not least those of Althusser and Poulantzas—and of such followers as Hindess and Hirst. Finally, my intellectual development was massively reinforced by giving lectures for the British Council in Hungary in the early 1980s, thereby seeing a politically stratified society at work together with endless variations in strategies as to how to live within it. This in turn led to massive reading of all sorts on the three countries mentioned, with sustained visits to all three from 1990—above all to Prague given my own heavy involvement in the earliest years of the Central European University.

All those points are general rather than Czechoslovak specific. But I had a long education in Czech matters at the hands of Gellner (as did others, above all those who worked with him in his last years at the Central European University) and want to say something about this—not least as his views were and are much more interesting than mine. I do so as an act of homage to a great Czech patriot. Though the sense of belonging to the country was never, given a Jewish background, total, it was certainly intense: he dreamt of Prague continually in the years after the exile that began in 1939, and of course returned to study in 1945 before going into exile again; he often sang Czech songs with the great Germanist Peter Stern (whose background was rather similar), and proudly played them on his mouth organ; and he returned to Prague after 1989, showing his feelings on one occasion by standing up in Café Slavia once it was restored to sing in front of rather bemused clientele. More importantly, he worked continually on cultural and political developments in the socialist bloc, reviewing endlessly on the current condition of Czechoslovakia. He had a clear view of the Velvet Divorce, and very much admired an essay of Jiří Musil's seeking to explain its structural base [Musil 1993]. Full details of his involvements, and of the other points raised about Gellner, can be found in my biography of this great polymath [Hall 2010].

Gellner's most immediate contribution was concerned with the work of Pavel Machonin. Crucially, he introduced Machonin at a conference on the Prague Spring and its aftermath, held at Ditchley House in 1989. He was fascinated by Machonin's work once it appeared, seeing it as anti-egalitarian for political purposes—the desire to create softer politics by placing power and influence in different sets of hands. He made sure that the work gained maximal attention: his account of 'the pluralist anti-levellers of Prague' saw the light in three different places (first as Gellner [1971]).

But Gellner would not have agreed with the comment of Tony Judt, also quoted by our editor, claiming that the suppression of the Prague Spring dem-

onstrated conclusively that reform communism was an impossibility. This is not to say that he lacked awareness of the situation in the country. Very much to the contrary, he claimed that the harshness of the treatment handed out to the Czechs was related precisely to the fact that they were so advanced. Nonetheless, for a quarter century he worked incessantly on seeking the roots of 'liberalisation' in Central Europe and in Russia, above all amongst Moscow's social anthropologists. The central idea of the conceptual apparatus he developed was simple. Late industrial society was held to depend ever more upon the sophistication of a technical intelligentsia; their style of life rested much more on genuine thought than on ideological strictures. Functional importance would lead sooner or later, Gellner claimed, to a softer political world—perhaps under communism, but a communism deprived of real belief. Skill mattered of course, the ability to demand the right amount—not too little, but also not too much.

In this matter I have come to think that Gellner's Saint-Simonian vision was mistaken theoretically—as of course it was empirically, given the manner of the collapse of the socialist bloc. Bluntly, politics mattered. For one thing, it became clear to me—not least when attending a conference organised by Ota Šik in Frankfurt in the early 1980s—that reform communism was likely to place power in the hands of the lower ranks of the party. States throughout history have been nervous about channels of communication that they can scarcely see. Accordingly, it has been very common to find that states ban horizontal linkages in society so as to privilege their own official means of communication. The reply of Trajan to Pliny (when he was the governor of Bithynia-Pontus) in response to his query as to whether to allow local organisation of a fire brigade in Nicomedia is revealing: such organisation should not even be contemplated, the emperor insisted, for once gathered together minds would drift from fires to politics [Pliny 1969: letters 22–23]. This seemed to me to apply exactly to communist elites. For another, very much depended on Gorbachev being allowed to try to reform communism, something that surely rested on the Soviet Union falling behind in the arms race. This is not to say for a moment that Gorbachev's particular moves were irrelevant, simply to stress a deep structural factor at work.

Bitterness is closely related to love. The reverse side of Gellner's patriotism was irritation and frustration at Czech (and Slovak) behaviour. For one thing, he felt that Dubček's attempt at liberalisation absolutely lacked the skill required. For another, he bemoaned the Czech tendency to give in too quickly, leading him to suggest as a title for one of the short books of the world 'Czech military victories'. In this vein he admired the essays of Petr Pithart [1990], and simply adored Jan Patočka's long letter on the defects of Czechoslovakia as an all-too-modest small state [Patočka 1992]. He would, I think, have written a monograph on the Czechs had he lived, so this is an occasion to mourn his passing.

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