

# Czechia and Slovakia. The left after social democracy

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**Social democracy is a term from the days of party democracy. The contemporary left is supposed to be a place for class analysis, but not necessarily for an “all-encompassing” class politics, regardless of so-called cultural issues. But is there a will within it for a transversal left politics?**

When I enter the main hall of Kollar’s house in Lubochno at the end of May, it is shortly after nine o’clock. The spa guests have already finished breakfast, two female staff members are preparing the dining room for lunch. They earn six hundred euros net. They like the steady work, but the pay is low. I ask if this is where the Slovak section of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia - section III of the International - was founded a hundred and two years ago. I have to ask, because there is no outward indication of this. There is no commemorative plaque. It is only when I walk round the building that I see a statue of a male figure with a torch in his hand. But just as it could be Marek Chulen (the initiator of the 1921 congress of the radical social-democratic left at which the party was formed), the statue could represent any builder of state socialism. And so I ask.

Two elderly middle-aged women are only a little surprised by my question. Yes, the Communist Party was founded here, but no one cares. “You know, some people say it was better under the communists,” one of the workers says. There are no social certainties, and to this general unease is added a failing political representation. “There is no one in charge, no one is running this country,” says a lady from Lubochno, commenting on the current situation.

When I meet a long-time cultural worker in Martin the day before, we also have a conversation about politics. How do people live here, who do they vote for, what is the composition of the town hall? I am surprised when he uses the term “social democracy” for the SMER-SD party. Even SMER itself has not interpreted its “SD” moniker as extensively as my companion has for a long time. For her, however, the term ‘social democracy’ is personified by that very party. I am not arguing with her. Who would I point to as social democracy? Isn’t social democracy an ideological designation that today not only has no referent, but there is no need to give it a meaningful meaning? According to Bernard Manin and other political theorists, the era of party democracies, in which social democracy could be identified as a clearly discernible ideological trend, is irretrievably gone.

So, if I don’t want to dwell on the decline of social democracy, I might rephrase the question about it as a question about left-wing politics where I live, where we live.

## **The everyday life of communists**

A few years ago, the US-based essayist Vivian Gornick was surprised to find that her book *The Romance of American Communism* (originally 1977, reissued 2020, Verso) had made a big splash in recent years among US-American adherents and supporters of so-called democratic socialism. Rather, she read in the failed romance of communists with their party a necessary disillusionment

with intense political life and with the intermingling of the political and the private, a disillusionment that should have been the logical conclusion of a political development far beyond the possibility of influence by the membership. Gornick collected these oral-history narratives disillusioned with the exhaustion of the radical mainstream of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s in the United States. Paradoxically (or not?), today's readership is impressed by the dedication of the Communist Party USA membership, especially before 1956, to politics, organizing, and agitation. Gornick's book is filled with life stories that could be described as unfortunate, to say the least—such as that of an introverted intellectual who gets a job as a factory organizer and is unable, even after two years, to build meaningful relationships with the workers.

But if the Communist Party's work brought simplifications in the sense that every man is expendable and therefore capable of any political work that simply needed to be done, it also obviously brought a lively politicisation that was part of the everyday and built an affective relationship between political ideology and partyism.

One might argue that even today, after all, there is politicisation, practically all the time. But the political-party work of the time did not consist in the bare discussion of frustration with existing conditions, but precisely in its ideological, strategic and tactical framing. In such discussions, which took place in the 1920s in poor Jewish households in New York's Bronx or Lower East Side over a single copy of the newspaper at the kitchen table, one does not give vent exclusively to dissatisfaction with the way things are, but grasps this dissatisfaction as one of many instances of social movements that are trans-individual.

Vivian Gornick, in her introduction to the 2020 reissue of the book, points out that “to understand the experience of being a communist or a communist as a love flare *romance* was (and I think still is) legitimate, but *to write* about the experience romantically is not.” Gornick's preoccupation with a love affair that turned out awkwardly at best and tragically at worst has more than the function of extorting the writer from a possible accusation of supporting political regimes that allowed the deaths of millions. It points out that we read politics and history as stories, through narrative schemes giving governments, eras, historical episodes a particular interpretation and emotional colouring. Marx's reading of bourgeois revolutions as tragedy and farce may be familiar enough; Gornick and other writers add to this narrative repertoire a possible reading of politics and history as love story or conspiracy.

Importantly, they point to political work as something that is fraught with affectivity, and also an activity that is woven into the everyday. Thus, there is no politics as a public sphere strictly separate from the private sphere. It is a process through which one identifies oneself with a larger project that transcends oneself, and at the same time, through this deflection out of oneself, one increasingly becomes oneself.

Left-wing politics does not take a step in the right direction without showing, without undue justification, that political activity can be enjoyed, that political action can be a good in which human relationships and particular communities are formed and fostered, which see things differently and want to live differently, and that politics is not a burden that the would-be saviours and rescuers of the world take on reluctantly, but out of the service of society, to save the world.

### **Ideologies need organisational forms**

The Gornick example, moreover, illustrates well that political ideological work is necessary for political action. While this may nowadays take the form of paid Facebook posts tested in focus groups or billboards targeting specific audiences, it is still something that should illuminate the world in which political actors or those they wish to influence live.

In the Czech leftist milieu, political-ideological work is being done in particular by Petr Drulák, who has centred one of the few polemics on the left around so-called conservative socialism, and has intellectually prepared possible points of contact with the nationalist crowds that will be arriving on Prague's Wenceslas Square from autumn 2022. But even the robust intellectual event that Drulák is attempting, which in his case sounds more like an inadequate substitute for his lost political influence, will not itself replace political organizing.

Michael Hauser wants to provoke a discussion of the left from different positions these days with the publication of *The Socialist Movement Manifesto* (2023). Whether his vision of a politics for the working majority - as he calls the political entity he wants to interpellate - will receive a proper response, especially from the various particularist movements that today defend public goods and oppose the politics of profit, the coming months will show.

It is clear, however, that the times are calling for manifestos. When Hauser, following Antonio Gramsci and Nancy Fraser, writes that we are in an interregnum, an interregnum, we can also understand this statement to mean that we are in a period of searching for an organizational form of political action. This question is addressed by the Platform for Social-Ecological Transformation Re-set, which bets on the principles of trade union organizing according to the US-American trade union organizer Jane McAlevey and seeks to build strong grassroots initiatives and social movements in their spirit. In addition, researcher and Re-set campaigner Josef Patočka (unlike both Drulák and Hauser) argues for the current anti-capitalist movement to put its energies into building (economic, social and political) structures outside the state, rather than betting exclusively on seizing political power in the electoral struggle. On the contrary, the acquisition of political power, according to Patočka, should only follow the construction of structures of social power (which can take the form of cooperatives, solidarity economy, social movements). Given the fact that in the Czech Republic left-wing political entities (be it the Czech Social Democratic Party, the Left Party or Budoucnost) have faced setbacks in recent parliamentary and local elections, the question of the organisational form of the left becomes urgent. Assuming that the electorate will force its representation by Social Democracy or some newer alternative to it has not worked.

### **First the strike, then the analysis?**

But perhaps it is necessary to take a step back from the political-ideological work and look at the nature of the class struggle, class relations and the working class itself. While on the one hand these analytical categories may seem obvious and sufficiently laid out in historical-materialist orthodoxy, as William Clare Roberts points out in *Class in Theory, Class in Practice* (2023), we tend to infuse them with concrete, handwritten content, especially the kind that holds out the promise of continuation for left politics. Roberts cautions against universalizing concrete examples and making false analogies.

Looking at current left feminist political theory, for example, one strand of it sees the feminist or women's strikes that have flared up in the last ten years, particularly in South American countries, Poland and Spain, as a primary mode of class struggle. The Manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* (2019, Czech: 2020) postulates a new form of strike as its first thesis and derives from the political action of millions of strikers the political subject on whose behalf it wishes to speak and which the manifesto is intended to legitimise. According to *Feminism for the 99%*, the new anti-capitalist feminism invents new forms of strike action that combine walking off the job with boycott or protest, and in doing so also expands the understanding of what is the labour that benefits capital. A much more detailed theory of the feminist strike is provided in *Feminist International* (2019, English 2020) by Argentine feminist, activist and academic Verónica Gago, who argues that the strike is a tool for exploring class conflict, class composition and the hierarchization of labour.

All of these functions can be fulfilled by the strike where it occurs. The strikes of hundreds of thousands of women and their allies against violence against women and for legal abortion in Argentina can fill us with hope in the possibility of change. But why is the Polish Women's Strike not 'working'? What lessons do we draw from it? As much as Gago's book is situated knowledge, which moreover grows out of the experience of a collective political subject, it is just that - situated knowledge - where attempts to push it into other settings can result in activism for activism's sake, an insistent need to "do something" and perhaps even disappointment.

Feminists are not alone in the (non-Sorellian) mythicizing of the strike. The strike activity of female employees of Nexen in Pilsen and of couriers driving for Wolt during the protests in Prague created a wave of solidarity that no part of the left political spectrum wanted to miss. On the one hand, one could appreciate that the left parties (from the Communists, to the Levicists, to Budoucnost) stand behind both the "old" class of manufacturing workers and the "new" class of workers in the platform services sector, but it seems to me that our spirited standing alongside both one and the other of these workers, as well as their leafleting, was more an expression of a lack of political analysis and strategy. We missed no opportunity to connect with the working class, all right. But what did we expect from this fleeting connection? That the determination to strike of specific workers would be transferred to us and by a strange osmosis we would suddenly understand how to act? We weren't clear about that - and that's why not much happened and still isn't happening.

### **Analysis does not equal politics**

The pressure from left feminist theorists and activists on left orthodoxy is obvious. They seek to broaden the notions of labour, working class and class struggle in the face of comrades who see the only correct left politics as "class struggle" centred around the proletariat. In this pressure or dialogue, left feminists should not relent. In the same way, it is important for the leaderships of essentially urban political parties to be in touch with the "rural" working class. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that the impact of a colloquial extension of the left's understanding of class (if it is successful at all) is limited if it does not distinguish between the level of class analysis and the level of political action. At the level of analysis it moves on its own territory, a territory constituted by a historical-materialist understanding of reality, but the level of political action is a terrain marked by the development of democratic institutions, in the creation of which it, too, had an undeniable share, the obsolescence of social democracy. Between these two logics, not only a 'translation' but also a (non-trivial) mediation is necessary. This has to happen within existing left political entities.

When Roberts argues against the authorship of the US-American journal *Jacobin* that the so-called culture wars cannot simply be translated into a class struggle, he does not start from the idea of so-called cultural identifications and disputes over them as epiphenomena derived - in the last instance - from class. The analytical abstraction of class does not, according to Roberts, generate a socialist or leftist politics that rejects movement on the terrain of the so-called culture wars. As he writes in his article published in the most recent issue of *Crisis and Critique* on the subject of class, "My main argument is that the structural primacy of class cannot, in capitalist societies, ground a normative preference for interpellating political actors as workers or for organizing around 'bread-and-butter' issues rather than around issues of police violence, health care for transgender people, or sexual harassment. Effective political action does not derive from a proper analysis of the class structure of capitalism. There is no reason to believe that appealing to universal ideals and material interests is a direct and clear path to the formation of a working class political movement."

At the same time, it should be added that just as politics does not automatically follow from analysis, neither does politics follow from one's own conviction of good intentions. With the second part of the preceding statement comes the "worker of Slovak politics", the forty-year-old Rado Bat'ó, in his

political memoir *Gravediggers of Slovak Politics* (2022). Let us make no mistake, Bata's political identification is centre-right, and this identification also defines the political subjects he works for. In his book - and probably in his work - he did not make a political-economic analysis based on an admittedly ideological understanding of the reproduction of society. Bata, however, manages in his latest book to convey a message that is relevant to any political subject entering the terrain of politics at the national level. Politics is a territory defined not only by formal constitutional rules, but also determined by, as Bata puts it, a "craft" that must be well mastered. Six centuries ago, the word art would have been used instead of craft - it would have captured the need to learn a certain virtuosity in mastering a complex environment that cannot be bound by the rules of democracy, and that is because it springs from the terrain of political freedom, as Nadia Urbinati writes.

### **One lesson from the Bata Council and one question**

The lesson from Bata Council for left politics, then, is this: Good intentions and supposed identification with the militant working class are not enough. The condescending moralising about the historical-materialist mills grinding slowly but nevertheless grinding on is of no benefit, only a feel-good factor for those who identify themselves as left-wing.

Related to this is the question of the organisational form of the left. In the feminist part of both Czech and Slovak politics, the vision that its individual components complement each other in a perhaps non-explicit, but nevertheless realistically existing division of labour, has long been promoted. However, I don't know if this - let's call it - luxury of complementarity can be afforded in feminism; rather not. Indeed, political action (whether partisan or non-partisan) tends to narrow the range of political issues at the same time as it expands (or maintains) constitution. Complementarity sounds like an ideal in the stable political field of party democracies, but in democracies of the public, as Bernard Manin writes about them, it is - I believe - a self-satisfying incantation.

The great disadvantage of civic or non-partisan forms of organising is that there is very little control over the raising of political issues and their timing. If, for example, organisations campaigning for a change in sexual violence legislation or for changes in the taxation of energy companies always have to wait for the opportunities provided by the electoral cycle and their own conscious parochialism, they are quite likely to be satisfied if their vision of the future is focused on meeting that single demand. However, if they see themselves as part of a comprehensive transformation of society which, while it may achieve some successes (changing the definition of rape and applying it to the penal system will most certainly bring justice to rape victims), but which, without a fundamental transformation of social relations, they will only see as partial, then, I believe, it is possible to construct a transversal left politics. And I think that is what it should be all about. But not without a proper analysis and outline of the politics that the left should be willing to discuss if it does not want to drown in a false consciousness of its own importance and historical correctness.

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**Lubica Kobová** teaches feminist and political theory at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague

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