



COUNTER-REVOLUTION, OR AUTHENTIC SOCIALISM?

The Reactions of the US Left
to the Events in Czechoslovakia in 1968

INTRODUCTION¹

In her newspaper column about the 50th anniversary of the Prague Spring, the Czech journalist Saša Uhlová describes the surprise of her French colleague when she found out that nearly everyone in the Czech Republic only associates the year 1968 with the Warsaw Pact invasion. Even contemporary witnesses of 1968 whom she met told her that they had not believed in socialism in those days and had known that the Czechoslovak project of democratic socialism had been destined to collapse. By contrast, many French reportedly still take the Prague Spring as an important symbol (Uhlová 2018).

Besides the reductionist character of the contemporary Czech commemorations of 1968, the encounter with the ‘Western’ journalist also shows an example of the difficulties that outside observers have when thinking about foreign events. In this sense, Slavoj Žižek talks about how the Western academic Leftists during the Cold War used “the idealized Other [...] as the stuff of their ideological dreams.” In the case of the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the ideological dream could be, according to Žižek,

Jan Géryk
Charles University
Prague
Czech Republic



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0792-1713>

1. This article is a part of the Primus/HUM/15 project called “Proměny práva v transnacionálních kontextech” (“Transformations of Law in Transnational Contexts”), at the Faculty of Law, Charles University. The article is based on my MA thesis called “The American Left and Communist Czechoslovakia, 1956–1968”. I would like to thank Kryštof Kozák, Francis D. Raška, Mikko Toivanen and two anonymous reviewers for their help and comments.

“the utopian notion that if the Czechs were only left alone, they would in fact give birth [...] to an authentic alternative to both Real Socialism and Real Capitalism” (Žižek 2002: 94).

However, was this notion of transnational ideological dreaming the only important one for the evaluation of the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the US Left, which was everything but a homogeneous entity? Did not, for example, geopolitical thoughts play an equally significant role? We should take both ideology and geopolitics into account while searching for the answers to the main questions of this article. I will particularly examine the issue of whether various US left-wing groups found the Czechoslovak reforms of the 1960s as an inspiring example of authentic socialism or not. And if not, whether they condemned these reforms as counter-revolutionary, or rather ignored and overlooked them. While talking about the US Left, the article will focus on such different groups as the loosely institutionalized New Left movements, the pro-Moscow and at that time marginal Communist Party USA (CPUSA), various small Trotskyist parties, and independent Marxist intellectuals. But, before elaborating on this main issue, the article will try to contribute to the field of transnational intellectual history of the Cold War era more broadly. Thus I will first describe the general atmosphere of the search for authentic socialism that was a characteristic aspect of the Left in the 1960s.

1. CHANGES ON THE LEFTIST IDEOLOGICAL MAP IN THE 1960S

Writing about the 1960s Left, we should be aware of two specifics of that era. The first is its global framework determined by the fact that two Cold War superpowers could cause a nuclear catastrophe, and by the ongoing process of decolonization that brought with itself a new form of the world order in which the concept of the Third World started to play a major role. The second specific refers to significant changes on the ideological map of the Left caused especially by the events of 1956. The disillusionment with Stalinism after the revelation of its crimes at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and also with the new Soviet leadership after the Soviet invasion of Hungary only a few months later, was fatal in the East as well as in the West.

However, the more or less gradual rejection of Soviet dogmatism did not yet mean a complete refusal of Marxist ideological frameworks. Rather, there suddenly appeared an empty ideological space that could be filled with new socialist ideas. This is why, for example, the Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, even though he left the British Communist Party in 1956, disagreed with the defeatist position of many disillusioned Communists and said that “the humanist Gods of social liberty, equality, fraternity [...] stubbornly remain on the Communist side” (Thompson 1957: 31). Similarly, in 1960, the forefather of the New Left in the US, C. Wright Mills, warned against the end-of-ideology approach since “it stands for the refusal to work out an explicit political philosophy. [...] What we should do is to continue directly to confront this need” (Mills 1960). In the course of the 1960s, however, the New Left and especially the counter-culture came with a new vocabulary of emancipation, emphasizing direct action and the creation of an authentic Self rather than building comprehensive ideological schemes.

With regard to Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the 1960s, it also seemed that the Stalinist dogmatism was hardly sustainable even though the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC) still, at least on the surface, adopted a cautious approach to reform. Despite some earlier reformist steps in the economic sphere, the political climate did not significantly change until 1968. However, the intellectual sphere was, already in 1968, full of various tendencies that strived for the replacement of the previous orthodoxy, although largely still not adopting the discourse of a different political system.²

The first tendency was an emphasis on scientific discourse where science served as a supposedly neutral language. Contrary to the cultural and anti-bureaucratic character of the Western New Left, the main Czechoslovak reformist current was scientific and expert-oriented in the 1960s (Sommer 2018). Secondly, there

2. Before elaborating on the new intellectual tendencies in Czechoslovakia, I should make one terminological note. Even though I am aware that it is difficult to use the term “Left” symmetrically for different political regimes in the West and in the East, I elect to understand all Czechoslovak streams of thought which will be discussed below as left-wing since all of them are firmly within the socialist framework.

was an important group of philosophers who tried to connect Marxism with existentialism or phenomenology, emphasized the concepts of truth and conscience, or participated in the so-called Marxist-Christian dialogue (Hrubý 1979: 410–411). The third tendency was connected to an effort to find the lost Czechoslovak road to socialism which was interrupted in 1948. Finally, there was, after all, a trend, especially among the youngest generation in the late 1960s, similar to the Western student radicalism, that remained hostile towards any ideology and organizational hierarchy. Václav Havel compared the older generation which approached reality “by way of certain abstract categories” with his generation which, on the contrary, tended “to start from reality as it exists at the moment” (Havel and Liehm 1970: 390).

These tendencies were connected to the rejection of the rigid superpower leadership and searched for a new and authentic model of socialism. Karel Kosík, one of the most famous Czechoslovak philosophers of that time, concludes his critical 1968 essay “Naše nynější krize” (“Our Present Crisis”) with the statement that Czechoslovak society merely switched the capitalist system of universal marketability with the bureaucratic system of universal manipulability. In the part of the essay which was not published in 1968, he adds that the victory of one bloc or system over another would merely mean “the triumph of the system, not a liberating breakthrough from the system to the world” (Kosík 1993: 48–49). The concept of authentic socialism came to the fore as a tool that the Left tried to use in order to find the way out of this crisis. As I will describe below in more detail, with the focus especially on the US and Czechoslovak context, the left-wing authors around the world searched for authenticity through the utilization of the following three alternatives. They saw opportunities in creating a transnational discourse around the idea of socialist humanism, in the revolutions of the Third World, and in the revival of local historical traditions that could be compatible with the Left’s idea of emancipation.

2. THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY: THREE ALTERNATIVES TO THE SYSTEM

The socialist humanist school was based especially on the reception of young Karl Marx’s work, notably of his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844. Erich Fromm, an important

figure of this current of thought, in 1965 edited the volume called *Socialist Humanism* which includes contributions by authors from all the Three Cold War Worlds and thus reflects the transnational challenges of that time. In his introduction to this volume, Fromm called the renaissance of humanism in different ideological systems “the most remarkable phenomena of the past decade.” Humanism, as “a belief in the possibility of man’s perfectibility,” and as the conviction that “what matters most is the human reality behind the concepts,” has usually emerged, according to Fromm, “as a reaction to a threat to mankind.” In the 1960s, he had in mind especially the threat of nuclear war (Fromm 1965: vii–viii).

In the Soviet bloc, moreover, the use of young Marx had a political reason behind it. Vladimír V. Kusín notes that in the 1960s, “there was sufficient ‘social demand’ for an authentic philosophical point of departure,” but, since non-Marxist “bourgeois” philosophers were not politically tenable, “no one was better suited to supply what was needed than the young Marx, the authentic Marx” (Kusín 1971: 48). However, the problem with the humanist interpretation of Marx in Czechoslovakia was, at least according to the recollections written by the former reform Communist politician Zdeněk Mlynář, that it was difficult to understand for the majority of Communists doing practical politics and incapable of replacing the ideological consciousness of the whole Party (Mlynář 1990: 54).

On a global level, the reception of the concept of socialist humanism was connected with the second source of authentic socialism, with the Third World. Raya Dunayevskaya, one of the founders of American Marxist humanism, mentions that the Soviets also began to frequently use the term humanism at the turn of the 1950s and the 1960s because they replied to the humanist ethos of some liberation movements in the Third World (Dunayevskaya 1965: 71).

But it was especially in the works of Western radical thinkers and activists that the Third World became a key space for the search for authentic socialism. For Herbert Marcuse, writing in the late 1960s, Third World radicalism, “this violent solidarity in defense, this elemental socialism in action has given form and substance to the radicalism of the New Left” even more than the “‘socialist humanism’ of the early Marx” (Marcuse 1969: 82). For a noticeable part of the New Left, Third World leaders like Patrice Lumumba,

Gamal Abdel Nasser, and, above all, Fidel Castro, represented “the possibility of a politics not yet bureaucratized and rationalized,” and “spontaneity and anarchic freedom,” contrary to the “mania for industrial production” common to the USA and the Soviet Union (Howe 1965: 316).

Old Left democratic socialists like Irving Howe criticized this view, arguing that totalitarianism can set in even before the modernization of society and wondering why some parts of the New Left identified with the more violent segments of the Communist world at the same time that many intellectuals in Eastern Europe emphasized the importance of democratic elements in socialist reconstruction (Howe 1965: 315, 319). In a similar manner, in 1968, critics pointed out that opposition to the Vietnam War should not go hand in hand with support for the North Vietnam regime, in part because the regime’s leaders supported the Warsaw Pact invasion in Czechoslovakia. When many members of the American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or their New Left counterparts in Western Europe chanted “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh” alongside their resolute condemnation of the invasion in Czechoslovakia, one reader of the Marxist humanist magazine *News and Letters* pointed out the incompatibility of these two positions. “Wouldn’t ‘Ivan, Ivan, Ivan Svitak’ be a more meaningful slogan [...] if SDS really means what it says?” the reader asked with a reference to one of the intellectuals who supported a truly democratic socialist reform in Czechoslovakia (Readers’ Views, Dec 1968: 4).

As for the Czechoslovak intellectuals, some of them found the Cuban revolutionary example inspiring in the early 1960s. In his book *Mrakodrapy v pralese (Skyscrapers in the Jungle)*, Adolf Hoffmeister expressed his admiration for the large rallies of people, where “Fidel Castro consults tens of thousands of manifesting people on the troubles of the government.” However, when the Cuban regime centralized power, became a direct Soviet satellite, and thus ceased to be an example of an independent road to socialism, the illusions began to disappear (Fiala 2016: 190–192, 197). Later in the 1960s, the reformist intellectual and later exile journalist Antonín J. Liehm even called the search for answers

to the problems of developed countries in Cuba or Latin America “extremely foolish, unhistorical and unrealistic” (Liehm 1970: 76).

Compared to the inspiration in the Third World, the localist alternative was more popular and important in Czechoslovakia. It was Jean-Paul Sartre who in the case of the Czechs and Slovaks emphasized “affirming their cultural personality [...] in order to dethrone the reign of the ‘thing’ that had reduced them to mere atoms” (Sartre 1970: 30–31). There was an attempt to combine socialism with traditional cultural legacy, in this case especially with the specific Czech humanism which went back to the works by the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the 17th-century educator and philosopher Jan Amos Komenský, and even the medieval church reformer Jan Hus. For Kosík, this humanism, i.e. the universal idea as a part of a particular national tradition, meant that the Czech question should be understood as a question of meaningful human existence and as a world question. This is related to the role of “the historical subject in Central Europe between the East and the West” (Kosík 1993: 39–40, 37). The writer Milan Kundera developed this thesis even more radically in December 1968 when he wrote that by their attempt to create humanist socialism the Czechs and Slovaks “appeared [...] at the center of world history and addressed the world with their challenge” (Kundera 1968: 5).

In the USA, we could see a turn from global abstractions of orthodox Marxism towards local traditions as well. The New Left veteran Paul Buhle wrote that it was around 1965 when traditional American forms of radicalism like women’s emancipation, utopian experiments, and racial unrest became stronger than during the several preceding decades. In this context, Buhle quoted a 1964 pamphlet called “Negro Americans Take the Lead” which said that “the pitiable subordination of American intellectuals to European historical norms and organization is seen nowhere as sharply as in their inability to recognize the specific American radicalism in the Negro movement” (Buhle 2013: 222, 225). Later, however, especially student radicals also used tactics like sit-ins and other forms of passive resistance, which they learned while participating in the Civil Rights Movement, in their struggles at the universities.

3. THE U.S. NEW LEFT AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA:
DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, DIFFERENT CRITICISMS

Overall, the examples mentioned in the previous section indicate that the influence of the Soviet Union became merely geopolitical in the 1960s and that the majority of Leftists were looking for intellectual inspiration elsewhere. If we now move to our question as to whether the Czechoslovak reform movement was inspiring for the US Left, we should at first elaborate on some important differences between the Czechoslovak and the US contexts. Only by keeping them in mind, can we ask whether or not the Czechoslovak reforms represented for various groups of the diverse US Left an example of authentic socialism, in this case most likely that of the Marxist-humanist kind. In this part of the article, I will focus mainly on the New Left, and in the following one on various Marxist parties and intellectuals.

One of the important traditional leftist dreams is a powerful alliance between the intellectuals and the workers. Yet it was quite difficult for the New Left in the US to persuade larger numbers of workers to be involved in its issues, for example, in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War, since many workers actually profited from the wartime economy. Moreover, the relative affluence of the US working class made it conservative and not very interested in traditional Left-wing topics (Thomas 1965: 324). The conditions for the intellectual-worker alliance seemed to be more favorable in Czechoslovakia, and especially during the first months after the invasion, the student movement “acted in harmony with the thinking of the majority of citizens.” For Liehm, the reason for this was that the emergence of the student movement “coincided with a major crisis within the country” (Liehm 1970: 46). In this sense, Czechoslovakia could be an inspiring example. However, towards the end of the 1960s, the New Left in the US largely abandoned the concept of the working class as a revolutionary subject. And since its appeal to the technological intelligentsia had failed as well, the poor and the oppressed minorities remained for the New Left the last possible groups with revolutionary potential (Diggins 1992: 265).

Another issue was that of civic and political freedoms, especially freedom of speech. In Czechoslovakia, the end of censorship was

generally accepted by the population as one of the most important achievements of the Prague Spring. The opinion of some Leftists in the West, where political freedoms were formally guaranteed, was substantially different. For Herbert Marcuse, one of the main philosophical teachers of the New Left, the exercise of one's political rights only contributed to the strengthening of the current administration because it was still within the framework established by a repressive society. "By testifying to the existence of democratic liberties which, in reality, have changed their content and lost their effectiveness," people are in danger, according to Marcuse, that "even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite" (Marcuse 1965). The New Left's call for "a total transformation of values, goals and human needs" which, according to Ivan Sviták, "steps beyond the bounds laid down by Marx" (Sviták 1973a: 72) was thus more separated from the direct interests of the population. It also meant, and Marcuse admitted it, that the protest against false morality and false values isolated the opposition from the masses (Marcuse 1969: 51).

Interesting tensions were created by the reactions of Czechoslovak students to the Vietnam War protests. While describing them, we should, however, remember that a potential popular initiative in Czechoslovakia was often absorbed by the State. Jiří Pelikán, the former leader of the pro-Communist International Union of Students (IUS), director of the Czechoslovak TV between 1963 and 1968, and then an exiled journalist pointed out that when the IUS and some local students initiated the collection of money for North Vietnam, the Party came out against it, following the logic of the general neutralization of popular political activities (Pelikán 2011: 77). This framework helps us to understand, for example, the Czechoslovak students' refusal to participate in another international solidarity event against the Vietnam War because of their impression that the event was politically imposed from above. In fact, they were asked to join by Bettina Aptheker, the American Communist and student activist who met with the Czech student Miluše Kubíčková during her stay in the USA (Pažout 2008: 164–167). On another occasion, during one anti-war demonstration in Prague, some Vietnamese students tore down an American flag from the building of the US

*Jan Géryk
Charles University
Prague
Czech Republic*

embassy. The reaction of a group of Czechoslovak students was that they returned the flag to the embassy staff (Liehm 1970: 89). As for their opinions on the Vietnam War, the French Trotskyist Hubert Krivine accused Czechoslovak students of advocating nearly anti-communist positions. For Krivine, they did not emphasize enough the aspect of national liberation in their interpretations of the war since they tended to see it as a struggle between American and Soviet imperialists (Pažout 2008: 164–165).

The ability of both sides to understand different context and experiences of the other was important but difficult to achieve. The *News and Letters* magazine published an interesting comparison of approaches of Czechoslovak reform Communists and the American New Left by one Czech student:

Our heroes, our gurus, if you like, are different from those in the West. Older people who influence students here tend to be theoreticians, not romantic revolutionaries. To some new left students it might all sound very conservative. Maybe someday we'll have our Cohn-Bendits here, but not for a while. Still, you know, when I talk to American kids I wonder whether they have really decided which is more important, revolutionary looks or revolutionary ideas (Czech Students Strike 1969: 7).

The last sentence could sound quite dismissive and confirms that some Czechoslovak critics, as the historian Jaroslav Pažout notes, were not able to fully recognize “the specific negative experience that the Western left-wing radicals had with their establishment” and that, in some cases, they began to understand it only after 1989 (Pažout 2009: 37). Similarly, Stanislav Holubec mentioned the biased, but in the Czech Republic still quite common notion, that the Prague Spring was a genuine fight for freedom and democracy whereas the Western revolts were just mischief of youth full of illusions about communism (Holubec 2009: 79).

With regard to this comparison, we should, however, keep in mind the different timing of protests and reforms in Czechoslovakia and in the West. The changes in Czechoslovakia, which were rather reformist, began at the time when the Left in the West was becoming more and more anti-systemic. This difference in timing could be the cause of Dick Greeman’s complaint in his article for *News and Letters* that “so few of the kids around SDS and the other radical youth organizations seem to identify

with the struggles of the workers and students in Czechoslovakia.” This does not mean that they supported the invasion since many of them protested against it, but only that “very few see the positive content of the Spring movement and the continuing worker–student protests in Czechoslovakia” (Greeman 1969: 7). This is confirmed in the *Telos* magazine’s introduction to Karel Kosík’s work where the editors also complained that the developments and liberating tendencies in Eastern Europe “had largely gone unnoticed in the West until Czechoslovakia’s ‘New Course’ and the subsequent Russian repression indicated that something very important was taking place in the Communist world” (“Introduction” to Karel Kosík 1968: 20). So, we can conclude that even though there was a global common base of the ‘68 movements which targeted ‘the System’ and searched for authentic socialism, important contextual and temporal differences between the East and the West prevented this base from further development.

4. THE U.S. FAR LEFT REACTIONS TO THE 1960S CZECHOSLOVAK REFORM MOVEMENT

In the final part of this paper, we can look at those few US left-wing voices that showed closer and more continuous interest in the development of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, state, and society within the context of the transformations of the global Left. We can study US left-wing reactions to the Czechoslovak economic reform, and then to political liberalization, and the subsequent Warsaw Pact invasion. I will try to set these reactions within the framework of the authentic socialism vs. counter-revolution debate and also to confront them with some Czechoslovak voices.

To begin with Czechoslovak economic reform, connected mainly to the name of the economist Ota Šik, we can notice that it tried to revive the weight of material incentives, like profitability as an economic stimulus. As Šik himself argued, the introduction of some market principles was not incompatible with socialism since there were still crucial differences from capitalism, like public ownership and the non-existence of private business profit-making (Page 1973: 22). However, the point of some authors publishing in the US Marxist socialist magazine *Monthly Review* was that “economic success is only part of the socialist dream” (Huber-

man 1965: 27). As Charles Bettelheim noted: “What characterizes socialism as opposed to capitalism is not the (non-)existence of market relationships, money, and prices, but the existence of the domination of the proletariat” (Bettelheim 1969: 5). Thus, what these authors primarily highlighted was the notion of economic democracy which was, according to Šik’s critics, rather weak in the economist’s approach. In other words, the class that dominated in Czechoslovakia was not the working class but technocratic managers who were even more powerful than in capitalist countries “for there is no class of capital owners whose interests the managers and technocrats must contend with” (Page 1973: 26).

Authors who defended Šik’s reform in front of American readers also had to oppose the arguments inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution that emphasized moral incentives in the economy. For George S. Wheeler, an American economist working in Czechoslovakia throughout the 1950s and 1960s, these arguments were inapplicable in Eastern Europe since “at this stage of development it is folly to expect that moral incentives will prevail over economic counterincentives to efficiency” (Wheeler 1973: 168). There was agreement on this point between Wheeler and Paul M. Sweezy who also did not see any group capable of choosing the Chinese way in the Soviet bloc even though he was otherwise quite in favor of the Cultural Revolution (Sweezy 1968: 11). Sweezy’s position was typical for debates in the *Monthly Review* magazine. He clearly refused the rigid bureaucratic planning of the 1950s in the East, but also criticized the turn to capitalist techniques in order to solve problems and saw the Chinese example as a successful attempt by the masses to unseat bureaucratic leaders (Sweezy 1969: 12–13, 17).

Now we can move to the Czechoslovak political developments in 1968 prior to the August invasion. In January, the ‘conservative’ Communist Antonín Novotný was replaced in his post of the CPC’s First Secretary by the more reform-oriented Alexander Dubček. In April, the Party launched the so-called Action Program which contained several liberal reforms signifying an economic and political thaw, especially with an emphasis on freedom of speech and assembly. Many people, however, wanted further democratization of political life. Their demands were embodied,

for example, in the “Two Thousand Words” manifesto written by the writer Ludvík Vaculík in June. Reformist and radical intellectuals differed in the intensity of their support for further reforms. George S. Wheeler observed in his book *The Human Face of Socialism*, written after he finally left Czechoslovakia after the invasion, that the “Two Thousand Words” manifesto was “not only untimely” but also “unfair to the new leadership” (Wheeler 1973: 136). On the other hand, for Ivan Sviták, as he wrote in a letter to Benjamin B. Page, the Action Program was “a dead born child” (*sic!*). “Everybody understood this, with the exception of Western journalists fascinated by the peripheral aspects of the whole political process,” complains Sviták (Page 1973: 15) who was clearly eager for a more substantial change. According to Sviták, while the elites thought they followed authentic Marxism, they, in fact, tried only to “eliminate the Stalinist deformations through a combination of Leninism and Masaryk’s tenets” (Sviták 1974/1975: 123).

The pro-Moscow CPUSA criticized the reforms, warning against a possible disintegration of the Soviet bloc. For its Chairman, Gus Hall, even though some reforms in the East were necessary, the Czechoslovak form exceeded the limits and “opened up the flood gates for a tide that created anarchy—a tide that swept in with it the forces of counter-revolution” (Hall 1968: 8). Among other things, Hall was outraged by the above-mentioned story when the Czechoslovak students returned the US flag to the embassy. “How else could we explain” this “disgraceful fact,” asked Hall, than by insufficient building of “a reservoir of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist ideology?” (Hall 1968: 11) The CPUSA, contrary to some other Communist Parties around the world that were able to resist Soviet pressure, supported the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia. It was expected of the Communist Parties that they would issue an official statement about the events, so they had to choose between siding with public opinion opposing the invasion and their allegiance to Moscow. As it follows from Hall’s note that “there are moments when a revolutionary party must take a firm principled stand regardless of its momentary effects on its public image,” the CPUSA chose the pro-Soviet option (Hall 1968: 1).

The necessity of issuing a Party statement could be divisive, but the disputes over the invasion were not as serious within the already marginal CPUSA as twelve years earlier in the case of Hungary. Two of only a few high-ranking voices of opposition inside the Party were Californians Al Richmond, the editor of the *People's World*, and Dorothy Healey. She remembered “a servile role” of the CPUSA “in promoting every lie spread by the Soviets” and pointed out the quite praiseworthy role of George and Eleanor Wheeler in Czechoslovakia who wrote frequently, especially to the CPUSA’s *Daily World*, “trying to correct some of the most ridiculous misconceptions” of its “journalistic onslaught” (Healey and Isserman 1993: 234, 229). The third person in the CPUSA’s National Committee who opposed the invasion was Bettina Aptheker, the daughter of the well-known Communist Herbert Aptheker. Her father, to the contrary, supported the Soviets both in 1956 and 1968 in pamphlets called *The Truth about Hungary* and *Czechoslovakia and Counter-Revolution* (Murrell 2015: 262).

The situation was more complicated among other small revolutionary groups. On the Trotskyist scene, there was the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), but two more radical groups were created after splits within the SWP—the Workers World Party (WWP) in 1959 and the Workers League (WL) in 1964 (Alexander 1991: 911, 923). Especially harsh in his criticism of the Prague Spring was the WWP’s leader Sam Marcy who was, however, contrary to the CPUSA, also critical of Moscow. For Marcy, even the Soviets had a revisionist leadership, but since Czechoslovakia had gone beyond any limits, Marcy supported the invasion in August. During the Spring of 1968, he attacked the developments in Czechoslovakia as “counter-revolutionary, anti-socialist and not very democratic, except insofar as right-wing critics of the regime are getting more and more freedom” in order to “deride Marxism,” “cozy up to the neo-Nazi regime of West Germany,” or “rehabilitate the symbols of old capitalist Czechoslovakia: Masaryk, Benes & Co.” (Marcy 1968) He described the confusion of the Czechoslovak workers who could “accept the ‘new nationalism’ as a genuine form of socialist autonomy, rather than the neo-capitalist restorationism it really is” (Marcy 1968).

1968
Transnational
Legacies

RIAS VOL. 12, FALL-WINTER Nº 2/2019

Contrary to Marcy, the SWP-affiliated newspaper *The Militant*, along with the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, believed that “the Czechoslovak counterrevolution is extremely weak and the international situation is hardly favorable to it” (“Czechs Fight for Socialist Democracy” 1968: 4). Reporting on the Czechoslovak situation, *The Militant* highlighted the emergence of new revolutionary literature, for example, the publication of *Informační materiály* (*Information Materials*) on June 24th, 1968, connected with a group of far-left Czechoslovak activists. The issue of *Informační materiály*, which included excerpts from the “Fourth International Manifesto”—“For a Government of Workers’ Councils in Czechoslovakia,” a translation of an interview with the German activist Rudi Dutschke, Zbyněk Fišer’s article, and Mao Zedong’s “16 Points on the Cultural Revolution”—was called a landmark of de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia (Foley 1968: 4).

What the above-mentioned Marxist groups which opposed the Soviet establishment had in common, even contrary to the young New Left, was the notion of the central position of the working class in society. Especially for the Trotskyists, the point of view of the working class and the survival of socialism prevailed in their criticism of the invasion. Soviet Communism in their view represented bureaucracy, not the working class. For example, the WL’s Bulletin wrote that the invasion was “a blow aimed at the Czech working class and against the working class of all countries” made because the Soviets feared the workers whom the government “could no longer contain” (“Soviet Tanks Roll on Czech Workers” 1968: 3). Similarly, *The Militant* issued a statement by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International which again emphasized the Soviet bureaucrats’ fear of the fact that “when the workers win these rights [...], they have started down the road to workers-council democracy” (“Fourth International Czech Manifesto” 1968: 6). The extraordinary Congress of the CPC at the Vysočany ČKD factory, which condemned the invasion a day after it happened, was especially positively interpreted by American anti-Stalinist Marxists. In this context, Andrew Filak wrote in *News and Letters*

Jan Géryk
Charles University
Prague
Czech Republic

about “recognition on the part of the party delegates that they would be safest with the workers—in a factory” (Filak 1968: 8).

Especially the post-invasion protests in Czechoslovakia represented for many American Marxists a promise of authentic socialism. “In raising the fundamental question of philosophy and revolution, the party and spontaneity, the unity of worker and intellectual, they have indeed laid the foundation of a new relationship of theory to practice. Thereby they have gone far beyond anything raised by the New Left in ‘the West,’” writes Raya Dunayevskaya (Dunayevskaya 1968: 8). Yet one reader of *News and Letters* warned that the Left should resist the illusion of Czechoslovakia’s momentary national unity and concentrate on the working class (Readers’ Views, Nov 1968: 4). In a similar way, Ivan Sviták, a fierce Marxist humanist critic of Dubček’s style of reforms, wrote later in his American exile that “the ideology of ‘reason and conscience’ or ‘socialism with a human face’ never and nowhere admitted that the political conflicts in 1968–69 were in fact class conflicts” (Sviták 1973b: 160).

Finally, we can mention that the socialist opponents of the invasion in Czechoslovakia also pointed out the similarity between the Soviet and US imperialist ambitions and compared the invasion to the US-led Vietnam War. Thus, the SWP’s presidential candidate Fred Halstead stressed the rejection of any ideological pretext for both invasions: “Moscow’s military intervention can no more be justified by false claims of defending the interests of socialism than Washington’s intervention in Vietnam is justified by its pretext of protecting ‘freedom’” (Halstead 1968: 1). Those who tried to legitimize the invasion, on the contrary, rejected the comparison. According to Herbert Aptheker, “to even hint at equating Warsaw Pact troops’ conduct in Czechoslovakia with that of US troops in Vietnam is [...] an act of distortion” (Murrell 2015: 263). As well, at the Hemispheric Conference to End the War in Vietnam, held in Montreal in the end of 1968, a group of predominantly African American revolutionaries of the Black Panther Party did not accept a resolution condemning the invasion since it “would be embarrassing to the Vietnamese delegations” (Readers’ Views, Dec 1968: 4).

As we have seen in the preceding pages, the stances of various US left-wing parties, movements, and groups on the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968 differed quite significantly, given their different power positions and ideological orientations. The CPUSA, for instance, emphasized the dangers of counter-revolution since it interpreted the Prague Spring from a rather geopolitical point of view. It meant that the CPUSA's discourse on the Czechoslovak events was mainly framed by the struggle between the two Cold War blocs and by the possibility of Western influence in Czechoslovakia.

The New Left, to the contrary, was such a free conglomerate of movements that its stance did not depend on the statements of other Parties of the same ideological orientation around the world, as was the case of the CPUSA. However, even compared to other analyzed left-wing groups, the New Left, in general, showed a relative lack of interest in the Czechoslovak reforms. One reason for this was that it was searching for authentic socialism elsewhere than in Czechoslovakia where the main political subjects were still the CPC's bureaucracy and the working class. The US New Left of the late 1960s did not understand technocratic experts and industrial workers as the groups with the greatest revolutionary potential. However, the invasion in Czechoslovakia was clearly condemned by many New Left groups.

Among Trotskyist groups, the reforms in Czechoslovakia could potentially resonate very well since the Trotskyists were not connected to any geopolitically significant Party and, at the same time, still recognized the primacy of the working class. So, for them and for other small Marxist revolutionary organizations, the interpretation of the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968 depended on their perception of whether the role of the workers was strengthening or declining because of the reforms. According to authors writing for *The Militant*, the danger of counter-revolution was weak in Czechoslovakia, so they rather expected a promise of the establishment of a workers-council democracy. For critics such as Benjamin B. Page and Paul M. Sweezy, however, the involvement of the workers in the Czechoslovak reforms was insufficient and the reforms themselves rather technocratic. More

radical critics, for example, the WWP's leader Sam Marcy, interpreted the Prague Spring as heading directly towards capitalism.

Finally, I can mention the group of democratic socialist and Marxist humanist authors which was, in my view, the most supportive of the further reformist process in Czechoslovakia. Some Czechoslovak authors cooperated with Erich Fromm on his *Socialist Humanism* volume; Raya Dunayevskaya provided an important space for reporting about the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968 in the *News and Letters* which she edited. Especially the short period of the Czechoslovak post-invasion resistance represented for Marxist humanists an emerging authentic socialism in which the intellectual-worker alliance could be achieved.

Regarding the transnational legacies of 1968 for the present and the future, we can make some concluding remarks about the concept of authentic socialism as such. As we have seen, especially when a conception of authenticity is connected with a particular authentic revolutionary subject, the powerful need for authenticity could cause tensions and a lack of understanding between different socialist groups. Moreover, according to the post-Marxist approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the search for the authentic subject means *"the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event independently of any articulatory practice."* This refers especially to their critique of "the ontological centrality of the working class" (Laclau and Mouffe 2013: 171, 20), but the New Left's inspiration by the Third World masses is only a shift from the centrality of the working class to another subject. In this sense, we could ask whether the reduction of societal complexity and the search for authentic socialism with an authentic revolutionary subject is not precisely the ideological dream of an outside observer which Žižek talks about. In our present complex world, the reductive character of the search for authenticity is even more evident than in the late 1960s even though such a kind of abstraction can sometimes offer us a necessary utopian element missing in our contemporary debates.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Robert J. *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Bettelheim, Charles. "On the Transition between Capitalism and Socialism." *Monthly Review*, Vol. 20, No. 10, March 1969, pp. 1–10.
- Buhle, Paul. *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left*. Verso, 2013.
- "Czech Students Strike; 'Spirit of Fight Is Alive.'" *News and Letters*, January 1969, p. 7. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/news-and-letters/1960s/1969-01.pdf>>.
- "Czechs Fight for Socialist Democracy." *The Militant*, May 24, 1968, p. 4. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1968/v32n21-may-24-1968-mil.pdf>>.
- Diggins, John P. *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*. Norton, 1992.
- Dunayevskaya, Raya. "Marx's Humanism Today." *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, edited by Erich Fromm, Doubleday, 1965, pp. 63–76.
- Dunayevskaya, Raya. "All Eyes on Czechoslovakia, All Hands Off!" *News and Letters*, August/September 1968, pp. 1, 8. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/news-and-letters/1960s/1968-08-09.pdf>>.
- Fiala, Jaroslav. *Jak se zbavit Castra: Kuba, Spojené státy a Československo ve studené válce*. Rybka publishers, 2016.
- Filak, Andrew. "Total Czechoslovak Unity Defies Russian Invasion to Crush Marxism." *News and Letters*, October 1968, pp. 1, 8. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/news-and-letters/1960s/1968-10.pdf>>.
- Foley, Gerry. "Czech Magazine Publishes Trotskyist Manifesto." *The Militant*, August 2, 1968, p. 4. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1968/v32n31-aug-02-1968-mil.pdf>>.
- "Fourth International Czech Manifesto." *The Militant*, September 6, 1968, pp. 6–7. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1968/v32n36-sep-06-1968-mil.pdf>>.
- Fromm, Erich. "Introduction." *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, edited by Fromm, Doubleday, 1965, pp. vii–xii.

Jan Géryk
Charles University
Prague
Czech Republic

- Greeman, Dick. "Czechoslovakia: High Stage of Struggle." *News and Letters*, February 1969, p. 7. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/news-and-letters/1960s/1969-02.pdf>>.
- Hall, Gus. *Czechoslovakia at the Crossroads*. New Outlook Publishers, 1968.
- Halstead, Fred. "Soviet Troops, Go Home! US , Get out of Vietnam." *The Militant*, August 30, 1968, pp. 1, 5.
- Havel, Václav, and Antonín J. Liehm. "Václav Havel." *The Politics of Culture*, edited by Liehm, Grove Press, 1970, pp. 372-394.
- Healey, Dorothy Ray, and Maurice Isserman. *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party*. University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Holubec, Stanislav. "Světová revoluce 1968 podle Immanuela Wallersteina." *Mladí, levice a rok 68*, edited by Martin Franc and Stanislav Holubec, Společnost pro evropský dialog, 2009, pp. 76-84.
- Howe, Irving. "New Styles in 'Leftism.'" *Dissent*, Vol. 12, Summer 1965, pp. 295-323.
- Hrubý, Petr. *Czechoslovakia Between East and West: the Changing Role of Communist Intellectuals, 1948 and 1968*. Western Australian Institute of Technology, 1979.
- Huberman, Leo. "Freedom under Capitalism and Socialism." *Monthly Review*, Vol. 17, No. 5, October 1965, pp. 14-29.
- "Introduction to Karel Kosík." *Telos*, No. 2, Fall 1968, pp. 19-20.
- Kosík, Karel. "Naše nynější krize (1968)." *Století Markéty Samsové*, Český spisovatel, 1993, pp. 25-62.
- Kundera, Milan. "Český úděl." *Listy*, Vol. 1, No. 7-8, December 19, 1968, pp. 1, 5.
- Kusin, Vladimír V. *The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring: The Development of Reformist Ideas in Czechoslovakia 1956-1967*. Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso, 2013.

Liehm, Antonín J. "Author's Foreword: On Culture, Politics, Recent History, the Generations—and also on Conversations." *The Politics of Culture*, edited by Liehm, Grove Press, 1970, pp. 41–92.

Marcuse, Herbert. "Repressive Tolerance (1965)." <<http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/60spubs/65repressivetolerance.htm>>.

Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Beacon, 1969.

Marcy, Sam. *Czechoslovakia 1968: The Class Character of the Events* (1968). <<http://www.workers.org/marcy/cd/samczech/>>.

Mills, C. Wright. "Letter to the New Left." *New Left Review*, No. 5, September/October 1960. <<https://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/letter-new-left.htm>>.

Mlynář, Zdeněk. *Mráz přichází z Kremli*. Mladá fronta, 1990.

Murrell, Gary. "The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States": *A Biography of Herbert Aptheker*. University of Massachusetts, 2015.

Jan Géryk
Charles University
Prague
Czech Republic

Page, Benjamin B. *The Czechoslovak Reform Movement, 1963–1968: A Study in the Theory of Socialism*. B.R. Gruner, B.V., 1973.

Pažout, Jaroslav. *Mocným navzdory: studentské hnutí v šedesátých letech 20. století*. Prostor, 2008.

Pažout, Jaroslav. "Studentské hnutí v západní Evropě v roce 1968 a jeho reflexe v Československu." *Mladí, levice a rok 68*, edited by Martin Franc and Stanislav Holubec, Společnost pro evropský dialog, 2009, pp. 31–37.

Pelikán, Jiří. "The Struggle for Socialism in Czechoslovakia." *Lives on the Left: A Group Portrait*, edited by Francis Mulhern, Verso, 2011, pp. 54–90 (e-book version).

"Readers' Views." *News and Letters*, November 1968, pp. 4–5. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/news-and-letters/1960s/1968-11.pdf>>.

"Readers' Views." *News and Letters*, December 1968, pp. 4–5. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/news-and-letters/1960s/1968-12.pdf>>.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Introduction: The Socialism That Came in from the Cold." *The Politics of Culture*, edited by Antonín J. Liehm, Grove Press, 1970, pp. 3–39.

- Sommer, Vít. "Zrození „normalizace“ z ducha pražského jara." *A2larm*, August 22, 2018. <<https://a2larm.cz/2018/08/zrozeni-normalizace-z-ducha-prazskeho-jara>>.
- "Soviet Tanks Roll on Czech Workers." *Bulletin*, September 2, 1968, p. 3. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/bulletin/v05n01-w090-sept-02-1968-Bulletin.pdf>>.
- Sviták, Ivan. "On Revolution and the Prague Spring." *New Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 1973a, pp. 68-78.
- Sviták, Ivan. "Marginal Notes on Prague Spring 1968." *Telos*, No. 17, Fall 1973b, pp. 157-168.
- Sviták, Ivan. "Illusions of Czech Socialist Democracy." *Telos*, No. 22, Winter 1974/1975, pp. 118-130.
- Sweezy, Paul M. "Czechoslovakia, Capitalism, and Socialism." *Monthly Review*, Vol. 20, No. 5, October 1968, pp. 5-16.
- Sweezy, Paul M. "Reply." *Monthly Review*, Vol. 20, No. 10, March 1969, pp. 11-17.
- Thomas, Norman. "Humanistic Socialism and the Future." *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, edited by Erich Fromm, Doubleday, 1965, pp. 319-327.
- Thompson, E. P. "Socialism and the Intellectuals." *Universities & Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1957, pp. 31-36.
- Uhlová, Saša. "1968." *Právo*, August 16, 2018. <<https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/480743-sasa-uhlova-1968.html>>.
- Wheeler, George S. *The Human Face of Socialism: The Political Economy of Change in Czechoslovakia*. Lawrence Hill, 1973.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*. Verso, 2002.