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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# TWO DECADES OF TRANSFORMATION OF INEQUALITIES: NEW IDENTITIES AND NEW FEARS IN POST-COMMUNIST CZECH SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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### **Introduction**

It has been twenty-three years since the Czechoslovakian Velvet Revolution brought socio-cultural changes, which transformed personal and public lives nationwide. This chapter is focused on the mapping of newly constituted inequalities in private and public dimensions within Czech society. We aim to provide a contemporary interdisciplinary insight into the process of transformation of inequalities in our country including gender inequality. We begin with basic information regarding the historical background, adding a brief overview of the development of Czech post-communist society, then continue with related theoretical concepts selected to be both innovative and inspirational and report our particular findings from additional research projects that we have undertaken or participated in during the last two decades. Our conclusions have been extended by the emergence of new questions. It cannot be said that the process of the transformation of inequalities is losing its dynamics. On the contrary, what we present here are ongoing trends.

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## Introduction to the historical context

Five decades of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia ended at the close of 1989, having begun after the German occupation during WWII (1939-1945). Parliamentary elections in 1948 “were won” after a coup, for numerous reasons, by the Communist Party (Davidson 1998, 227-32). Those fifty years of totalitarianism (1939-1989) contained only two bright moments of freedom. The first came in 1945, when at the end of WWII a sense of euphoria erupted as the Nazi regime collapsed. But the elation was matched by puzzlement as to why this was undertaken mostly by the Red Army and not US forces poised to roll into Prague from the west. Later, it became clear that geopolitical rather than strategic reasons were at play in this decision (in 1945, US forces halted their troop advancement fifty kilometres west of Prague and waited several days for the Soviets to advance from the north-east) (Pogue 1996, 468-9, Davidson 1998, 229). The fact that significant territories in the west and south were nonetheless liberated by US forces was systematically suppressed after the communists came to power in 1948. The second important moment of freedom began in 1968 when a series of internal reforms were undertaken by the ruling communist apparatus. These were initiated by the young and popular reform-oriented communist leader Alexander Dubček (Davidson 1998, 234-8), under the motto: “Socialism with a human face” (Wasserstein 2007, 597-608). But this short movement (known as the “Prague Spring”) ended abruptly in the summer of 1968, when around half a million mostly Soviet soldiers invaded the country (then a part of the Warsaw Pact), at first by air, then by land. Czechoslovakia was occupied, but conservative communists, who had invited the Soviet troops, quickly legalised this aggression as an act of “brotherly assistance”. Soviet troops finally left Czechoslovakia in June 1991 after twenty-three years (Kenney 2006, 129-31).

These brief moments of hope experienced in 1945 and 1968, coupled with the memory of a successful democratic state<sup>2</sup> between WWI and WWII (1918-1939) (Olson 1997, 189), provided the Czech people with sources of hope during the tough times of the Nazi and then the communist totality.

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<sup>2</sup> The Czechoslovakian state emerged in 1918, following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of WWI. Following independence, the country experienced both stability and prosperity as a democratic state, known as the First Republic. The Bohemian part of the country belonged among the most developed areas in Europe.

Inequalities within Czech society before the Velvet Revolution were delineated by the membership or non-membership of the Communist Party and consequently via the respect or disrespect of totalitarian rules in everyday life. Or, it was sufficient to convincingly declare one's respect for the regime and methodically teach the same to one's children—namely, a put-on public display of respect. These criteria also played an important role in opening opportunities to reach higher social status, meaning the possibility of studying in schools of higher education, to build a professional career (Holý 1996, 156) and also, crucially, to have the power to control other people in almost all levels of not only public, but also private life.

People lived in fear as to whether even their closest relatives and friends might be informants of the secret police. Most remained afraid to express their own views or to entrust these private views to others. An overwhelming and ubiquitous sense of fear existed, one that very often served to entirely supersede notions of trust. And if you *did* trust someone, then it was usually within a small group of friends and family, trying to create a kind of escapist alternate reality (Bren 2002) from the official one propagated by the regime. Outsiders, but also many insiders, represented a potential threat. It was part of an everyday strategy of survival to pay attention to what was said, who might overhear what and report it to the secret police.<sup>3</sup>

## Research background

The authors of this chapter are senior researchers in the area of cultural studies, cultural anthropology and psychology and are based in Prague. Texts in this chapter reflect not only their recent research activities, but also their own life experiences.

The text contained in this chapter is underpinned by a longitudinal research project undertaken by the first author from 2000 – 2010 (Kuška 2010), in which a sample of 422 university students (f = 246, m = 176) filled in a short questionnaire. Respondents answered two open questions: (1) “What have we gained from the contemporary world?” and (2) “What

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<sup>3</sup> For example, listening to foreign radio, e. g. Radio Free Europe and Voice of America was illegal. Transmissions by foreign broadcasters were routinely jammed, but many citizens still found ways to receive them. Possession of any information contrary to the party line was always a risky endeavour and those who sought out such information remained careful with whom they shared it. Schoolchildren could get their parents in trouble if they inadvertently revealed that their parents were listeners of illegal radios.

have we lost in the contemporary world?” The minimum length of each answer was limited to 650 words. All respondents, unlike students from non-ex-communist countries, perceived the fall of totalitarian systems as a fundamental change of the country’s socio-cultural reality. An analysis of the collected narrative data has helped us to demonstrate the formation of specific groups of fear elicitors and new identities in Czech society. This source of data also served as one point of departure for the formulation and realisation of the empirical research project “Stress in the Emotional Meaning Space” (2009 – 2011), targeted at emotional coping mechanisms (Trnka et al. 2011).

A research project undertaken by Charles University in Prague, Department of Cultural Studies, represents a further source of data. In this team, the first author undertook the individual empirical study “The Czech Public, Culture and Globalisation”. The aim of this study was to determine the existing attitudes of Czechs towards the processes of globalisation and to interpret these within a wider context of this dominant form of socio-cultural change (Kuška 2004).

### **Theoretical mirror**

In this section, we would like to highlight several theoretical foundations to social inequalities in transition societies. We omit for reasons of limited space “traditional” and well-known theories of social inequalities by figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755), Karl Marx (1867) or Max Weber (1922), and instead introduce selected contemporary theoretical approaches.

Traditional theories of social inequalities were based on the existence of social classes. Such constructions are still usable in Western countries of the Euro-Atlantic socio-cultural area. It is significant for totalitarian regimes that they essentially side-lined or marginalised the pre-existing elites. The communist regime struggled for a new world order via the elevation of the proletariat. It is historically evident, that the working classes, as they exist (or have existed), are not inherently predisposed to initiate processes of transformation, instead they may easily be manipulated by those with greater knowledge and power (Wolin 2004, 376-80).

During the post war rise of communism, force was used to implement change in the name of the working classes. Existing elites were labelled as enemies of the new order. Business owners, large and small, as well as larger property owners became enemies of this totalitarian socialist state. They then fell victim to nationalisation, collectivisation in farming,

punitive taxes and currency reform as well as being accused and frequently convicted (in show trials) of being agents of foreign powers; intellectuals and church leaders, or anyone else representing an alternative reality or fighting against the new regime would be made to suffer for their opposition (Navrátil 1998 Rupnik 1989, Kaplan 1990).

The post-Velvet Revolution situation in Czechoslovakia, which can be generalised for all post-communist countries in the '90s, contained no traditional classes. Barbara Heyns (2005) surveyed market transitions in post-communist countries and brought some well-argued and contextual findings: she describes increasing inequalities by age, education, region of the country, and health status in Central and Eastern Europe and she also highlights declining differences by gender. In 1989, women were better educated than men throughout the region; they were also over-represented in professions that in the West were highly paid and dominated by men, such as medicine, dentistry, management, law, education, and administration. Of course, these jobs were not paid salaries equivalent to their value in market economies, nor did they permit much self-direction or professional autonomy. Under socialism, manual labour, especially in heavy industry, was highly rewarded and "almost exclusively male" (Heyns 2005, 180). As noted in the above text, inequalities, which arose during the totalitarian era, notably in the fields of wages and gender, continue in Czech society to this day (Fischlová 2005).

The general typology of the most important competencies that cause social inequalities was developed by Nico Stehr, who focused his research activities on the transformation of industrial societies into knowledge-based societies. He created a typology of the most important competencies that cause social inequalities today: the capacity to exploit discretion, the facility to organise protection, the authority to speak, the ability to mobilise defiance and the capacity of avoidance and exclusion (Stehr 1999, 58). He draws from George Simmel's "Philosophy of Money" (Simmel 1900) and conceptualises knowledge as the capacity for action.

### **New reality: emergence of new identities**

The process of interiorisation of the economic view of the world, self, family and social relations in individuals significantly influenced the emergence of new identities during the post-communist period.

To better illustrate the dynamics in the transformation of identities, we selected the following types of citizens: politician, entrepreneur, labourer and judge. We briefly characterise their roles and positions in totalitarian

communist society and in contemporary post-communist society in both the personal and public spheres.

To be a politically active person during the former totalitarian regime generally meant one had to embody this regime. We can map these basic motivations: personal interests to have better access to material wealth and career; the possibility to actively exercise power over other people's everyday lives; to be a privileged member in society. From the outside, it was impossible to recognise if politicians were really in line with communist ideology in their minds, but either way, they had to demonstrate unquestionable outward devotion.

The 1989 revolution brought new demands on new politicians. A significant factor was the wholesale rehabilitation of the very notion of being a politician. This was widely discredited by the former totalitarian regime in the minds of those who cared about politics, but were not yet active in this field. There were only a few other sources for the new political class: dissidents and returned exiles.

Today, motivation to be a politician is perceived as personal ambition to participate in the slicing up of the cake. This is accelerated by the privatisation of state property in the 1990s, and later, by opportunities to manage businesses in the public sector (municipalities, infrastructure, state-owned companies and the redistribution of European funds) as well as to work as a *de facto* servant for commercial interests of mostly foreign investors.

The notion of the entrepreneur is a relatively new identity in post-Velvet Revolution society if we omit the rare communist-era small entrepreneurs like mini-farmers or so called entrepreneurs, illegal but tolerated moneychangers<sup>4</sup>. During the 90s, the typical entrepreneur was described as a middle-age male, wearing a violet jacket, white socks, black moccasin and beige or grey trousers, equipped with a black briefcase and cell phone in his pocket. Today's Czech entrepreneurs are very similar to their colleagues in Western countries and women are widely accepted in

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<sup>4</sup> In Czechoslovakia (as in other communist countries such as Poland, GDR or the Soviet Union), a second currency called "bony" (the coupons) was in existence. This currency, issued by the government, enabled the purchase of selected western goods and also domestic products of reduced availability in a special network of shops. Communist regimes in general had ongoing issues with securing hard currency. This was achieved in part by having both foreigners and Czechoslovaks travelling abroad (for example singers) convert their foreign currency wages or gifts into "bony" upon their return. "Bony" could only be legally bought for foreign currency not Czechoslovak crowns. The illegal selling of "bony" in exchange for Czechoslovak crowns (and the exchange of hard currencies) took place on the black market.

this role; even the debate about a dilemma between career and family is heard, often in the context of the ageing and low birth-rates of Western civilisation.

During communist times, working men and women were archetypes in the communist society. Workers were glorified. The official mythology of the proletariat was an important part of communist ideology. The post-WWII communist takeover was ostensibly initiated in the name of the working class, while in reality workers had very little real say in their government. Positive discrimination for labourers and for people with “working class” origins was also initiated by this regime. Worker professions were divided by gender, though the idea of women assuming traditional male positions was welcomed. A typical labourer in the Czech Republic is similar to that found in much of the Western world. For example, such people work at supermarket checkouts or on the factory assembly line.

The judiciary was essentially incorporated into the executive of the communist regime. The manipulated trials of the 1950s had many unfortunate victims (Hodos 1987, Davidson 1998, 236-43). A key difference with democratic societies became evident: one could be convicted and even executed merely for having an opinion that differed from officially approved ideology (Marková 2003, 171).

For almost two decades now, judges in contemporary Czech society have been criticised for inefficiency, with numerous trials running for many years, leading many to fear prolonged and hopeless efforts in this arena (Terterov and Reuvid 2005, 26-7). In recent years, there has been consistent talk of a “judicial mafia”, which accedes to the whims of politicians and is not solving clear cases of corruption, mostly by specific politicians (Department of State 2010, 1271-2). The second half of 2011 brought media reports of one or more corruption scandals on a weekly basis, but no politician has ever faced serious jail time for corruption in the last two decades. Almost two-fifths of Czechs believe that fairness can be achieved via international law courts (i. e. the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights) (Kuška 2004).

## **Empowerment and gender inequality**

The most apparent phenomenon of the post-Velvet Revolution period was the emergence of the “double workload” of Czech women. Each citizen, with the exception of mothers with young children, had the obligation “to be employed” during the communist period. A full-time job was obligatory for everyone and breaking this law was punished by the



system. On the other hand, salaries were equally low for everyone with the exception of governmental officials and politicians. Wage levels were often dependent only on the monthly amount of hours spent at the workplace and therefore performance was rather poor in many labour sectors.

The situation has changed from the Velvet Revolution onwards. The amount of contributed success or performance has become the dominant factor relating to wages earned. This shift influenced both the public and private lives of Czech women. Many Czech men expect that their wives will proceed with full time jobs and that they will also be employed in well-paid jobs. At the same time, the majority of Czech society continues to share the social construct of woman as a “family care giver” and expectation that a women should manage most domestic work (Radimská 2003). Many women have become more stressed due to the increased demands of the workplace and insufficient participation of husbands in domestic duties. Ivo Plaňava (2000) and Radka Radimská (2003) reinforce this point in their findings that show that most domestic work still depends on Czech women, despite their increased professional engagement.

Why has the opinion that everyone should be employed in a full-time job in Czech society, emerged? The key factor may lie in insufficient awareness of the importance of time that is invested in domestic and family life. The emergence of a market economy after the Velvet Revolution (1989) started the process of interiorisation of the economic view of the world, self, family and social relations. Therefore, prevailing life goals within Czech society have changed to earning money and cumulating material possessions.

Unpaid work within the family continues to have almost zero value in the eyes of Czech people. Men in particular often see domestic work and childcare as “natural” duties for women. Given the fact that men occupy most top positions in Czech commercial and public sectors, there is an absolute lack of “family friendly” jobs in the Czech labour market. Quantitative studies from the 90s showed that requests for part-time jobs were a frequent reason for the rejection of women in many job applications (Hašková 2003).

Furthermore, negative stereotypes also exist with regards to women who have chosen a life as home-makers. Many Czech husbands believe that “household” women are more prone to having extra-marital sexual relationships. This stereotype is rooted in the ‘90s, during which time a new identity of “entrepreneur“ emerged. This post-Velvet Revolution entrepreneur was typically a workaholic man, who spent 12-14 hours a day working hard, perhaps in the development of his own company. Such

entrepreneurs were looking for highly attractive women, who could best “represent” them at parties and at social encounters with colleagues. Concurrently, the wives of such entrepreneurs represented the first group of household women after the Velvet Revolution, named “zelené vdovy” or “green widows“. Green widows are defined as “wives of rich entrepreneurs living in detached houses in the peripheries of city” (Smolová 2009, 8). Such new entrepreneurs were often totally absorbed by their business activities and invested very small amounts of time in their private lives. “Green widows” reported increased levels of boredom, loneliness, and isolation (Smolová 2009). Clinical psychologists Petr Šmolka (Šmolka 2003) pointed out that the green widows are more prone to having extra-marital sexual relationships and also to indulge in frequent alcohol consumption. Czech men have even created negative stereotypes such as “the only concern of ‘green widows’ is to capture a rich groom and spend his money”, or “boredom motivates ‘green widows’ to commit infidelity” (Smolová 2009).

Nowadays, the “double load” of Czech women represents a frequently discussed issue within both the public and the private discourse. It seems that the crucial factor is the insufficient work participation of husbands in the domestic sphere. What constitutes the barrier of possible higher work participation of Czech men at home? It seems that the most significant barrier is the low social appraisal of family care within contemporary Czech society. In contrast, earning money and cumulating material possessions are highly appraised by Czech society. Therefore, men get positive feedback from society when playing the traditional role of breadwinners. Although some “ice-breaking” has occurred, the mainstream of the Czech society still persists in the old paradigm.

### **Shaping new fears and identifying the most serious issues in contemporary Czech society**

Many sources of social fear during the communist period were based on an existential uncertainty that was artificially propagated by the communist system. Numerous reasons could lead to a person being the subject of surveillance, listening to Western radio (Cumings 2009) or even men having long hair (Bažant et al. 2010, 342-3), often as the result of trumped-up charges. It was not just the individual in question, but often, in more serious cases, his or her family and friends too were subject to persecution. This included being expelled or banned from higher education, being prohibited from gaining meaningful employment relative to abilities or the truncation of career advancement (Eyal 2003, 42-58).

Only those who actively proclaimed their allegiance to the regime had any chance of climbing the socio-economic ladder. In our work, we have identified three groups of actual fear elicitors and their development: aging, security and, as previously noted, the context of parenting and gender.

New actual fears are represented by the unfortunate state of the public purse after the years of deficit-spending, now exacerbated by the current economic crisis. Fears also exist that the state will be unable to pay out pensions in the future to today's tax-payers. At the same time, the population is ageing. Taxes will have to go up and spending will have to be cut, while unemployment appears to be doing the same. Simply put, the privatisation of profits and the nationalisation of losses.

New sources of social fears have emerged since the Velvet Revolution. One of the key ones is the corruption of the judicial system and politics. Post-communist citizens largely do not trust to the efficacy of the judiciary or the police. The on-going stratification of Czech society produces new inequalities that are mostly based on economic factors. Members of the economic elite, who control strategically significant resources, are failing to follow the rules and norms of the society they represent, instead of proudly carrying the identity tag of "new elites".

Meanwhile, both personal and public debts have soared in recent times (Ministry of the Finance of the Czech Republic 2012), while the political, private and judicial spheres have become ever more intertwined. The aforementioned term "judicial mafia" is frequently used colloquially to describe those behind such lawlessness (Druker 2007, Department of State 2008, 1257-8, Department of State 2010, 1275-6).

## Conclusions

Contemporary Czech society is an example of transformation, whereby old inequalities fostered by the former totalitarian regime are now being replaced by new ones, created by the currently established distribution of power in a globalised world. The most apparent and important post-Velvet Revolution processes taking place within the framework of democracy are the ones that bring qualitative change.

In the Czech Republic, a synergy of fifty years of totalitarian devastation of moral and ethical norms is evident. Today, incorporating the country into the global economy represents historically unique conditions for people democratically elected during the last two decades to serve the public. However, as underscored by a headline article in the *Financial Times* (Ciensky 2011), Transparency International reports or

*The Economist* (K.M. 2011) rates of corruption in the Czech Republic match those found in many African dictatorships.

There is a unique perception of the current global economic crisis among Czechs. Debates often centre on beliefs that if there were no public sector corruption there might also be no significant public-sector debt. The post-Velvet Revolution political environment is also the result of a post-totalitarian sense of resignation and resistance towards taking “res publica” into one’s own hands. But the who, how, and why of those politicians able to take matters into their own hands, often at the expense of the greater good, perfectly underscores the previously outlined complexities related to non-altruistic self-advancement. Barbara Heyns (2005, 188) notes:

Social and economic transitions have no final chapter. The post-communist saga is just beginning. The eight countries that joined the European Union in 2004 and the five that have achieved growth with equity are surely in a far better state than the former Soviet Union. The bulk of the evidence indicates that economic development and poverty reduction depend on collective policy choices, and not invisible hands.

Education and health as instrumental means towards one’s well-being have gained more economical momentum in the developing competitive social order. Significantly some traditional features of society, such as marriage and child-care, have become less important as individual social class advancement has increased.

Czech society, similarly to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, has gone through fifty years of totality. Yet it also has a rich tradition of prosperity and democracy stemming from its experiences during the years prior to the Second World War. Thus, Czechs arguably have a historically cultivated sensitivity for identifying various forms of inequality and lack of freedoms, and we “only” lack effective institutions to properly implement the desirable steps for tackling such societal ills. To this end, and in this phase of the Czech transformation, the European Union presents a framework that enables us to actively envisage the idea of a functional democratic society, albeit one that can bring about new inequalities.