

# MATERIAL



# LUBOMÍR SOCHOR

## and the Pragmatics of Stalinism\*

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Lubomír Sochor (1925–1986) was a Czech Marxist philosopher and sociologist. In his work, he focused mainly on the historiography of Marxism, the methodological problems of historical materialism, the theories of elites, and the study of Soviet-type societies.

Sochor's intellectual development has various elements in common with that of his fellow travellers of the same generation – not only in Czechoslovakia (such as Karel Kosík), but also elsewhere in Central Europe (Leszek Kołakowski, for example). During the war he was involved in the resistance against the Nazis. Philosophically, he was an adherent of Marxism and politically an advocate of socialism. During his studies in the second half of the 1940s he became radicalised and came to identify himself intellectually with Stalinism. This is documented by articles that Sochor published in the official Communist Party journal *Nová mysl*, where he worked as an editor from 1949 to 1957. He soon experienced an intellectual crisis, which in his case became apparent immediately after Stalin's death but did not fully show itself until the revelation and criticism of the "cult of personality."

This crisis brought with it a range of questions to which Sochor sought answers for what was essentially the rest of his life. His attention was attracted in particular by the phenomenon of Stalinism: its essence, the conditions of its formation, its possible transmutations after Stalin's death, as well as the presence of Stalinism in everyday life. In the light of the critique of the aforementioned phenomenon, Sochor envisioned

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the prospects for democratic socialism and inquired into the causes behind the deformations of the ideals of socialism that happened in the course of its realisation. With reference to intellectual Stalinism, a burning question for him became the relevance of the history of Marxism for the further development of Marxist theory, as well as the explanatory potential of Marxist theory to grasp the reality of socialist societies.

In the second half of the 1950s, Sochor was a member of the so-called “Yugoslav group.” Its members were prominent members of the municipal committees of the Communist Party in Prague and of the Evening School of Marxism-Leninism (which included Klement Lukeš, Eduard Novák, Jaroslav Opat, and Jiří Pelikán). Those participating in the meetings openly discussed the phenomenon of Stalinism. They debated why the realisation of socialism had found itself at a dead end and whether the Yugoslav model could represent a way out of this impasse. The discussions were also actively attended by Yugoslav diplomats and journalists and were frequently held at the Yugoslav embassy, a fact that caused problems for the group’s members. They were arrested and interrogated, and subsequently accused of espionage and sentenced. In 1961 Sochor was expelled from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and reassigned to manual labour. For two years he worked in a factory as a milling machine operator.

He regained his Communist Party membership in 1963 within the framework of political rehabilitations. In the same year he started working at the Faculty of Law at Charles University in Prague, where he taught history of Marxism and sociological theory. The next six years were among Sochor’s most productive. He contributed to academic journals and cultural periodicals (*Plamen*, *Orientace*, *Světová literatura*, *Literární noviny*, and so on), and reported on current discussions in Marxist theory and critical theory occurring in foreign academic journals and Party magazines (for example, *Rinascita*). He prepared a range of publishing proposals, which came to fruition in the publication of a representative anthology of Marx, *The Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci, and anthologies of the works of Antonio Labriola and Abram Deborin; furthermore, several of these titles were translated by Sochor himself.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he worked systematically on his two books: one on the history of Marxism and the second on the concept of alienation.

Sochor’s interest in the historiography of Marxism was provoked by his intense coming to terms with the phenomenon of Stalinism, primarily understood not as a political, social, or economic system, but rather as a theoretical system *sui generis*. Among other areas, this system behaved harshly towards its own philosophical tradition, that is, the

<sup>1</sup> As regards translations, Sochor contributed to the translation of the anthology of *The Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci (only two out of a planned three volumes were published). He translated Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* into Czech as well as the slim volume *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*, Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*, and Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*. Sochor’s unpublished translations are being issued by the FILOSOFIA publisher in the series “Emancipace a kritika.”

history of Marxism. Sochor points out that “one of the greatest sins of dogmatism is [...] utter nihilism with regard to the values that were bequeathed by the actual history of Marxism and with regard to their philosophical legacy, the problem that this history contains.”<sup>2</sup> To come to terms with Stalinism means, therefore, to reject such historical nihilism, which Sochor accomplished in a dual manner. On the one hand, he historicised Stalinism and made it a part of the history of Marxism, and on the other he attempted to retrieve from oblivion the *values* of Marxism that Stalinism had either consciously denied or unconsciously overlooked. In 1965, Sochor completed and defended his inaugural dissertation *Studie z dějin marxistické filosofie* (Study in the history of Marxist philosophy). However, his literary estate also contains the later, slightly amended and supplemented version, *Příspěvky k dějinám marxismu* (Contributions to the history of Marxism), dated 1975. Despite the fact that Sochor continued his work on the history of Marxism until the 1980s, this was never published in book form.<sup>3</sup>

His work on the concept of alienation was completed in 1961 and bore the title *Marxova teorie „odcizení“ a spory o „mladého“ Marxe* (Marx’s theory of “alienation” and the controversy over the “young” Marx). Sochor’s plan had been to publish it in book form under the title *Spory o mladého Marxe* (The controversy over the “young” Marx); unfortunately, this never happened, although a study in which Sochor summarised the main argument of the book appeared in print.<sup>4</sup> Sochor was convinced that it is necessary to apply Marxist conceptions to a social reality which itself declares that it is building upon the theoretical pillars of Marxism. Sochor regards the concept of alienation as suitable for this purpose, since it can attest to the explanatory, hermeneutic, and critical potential of Marxism, which was suppressed by intellectual Stalinism. With the aid of the concept of alienation, it is possible to uncover the dehumanising tendencies present in these societies, consisting in the systematic displacement of the first person perspective. In other words, it is possible by this means to understand easily why Stalinism led to a devaluation of the explanatory, hermeneutic, and critical values of those Marxist concepts that took into account a first person perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Lubomír Sochor, *Sociologie románu* [Sociology of the Novel], 1965, p. 3 [typescript]. Elsewhere, Sochor states: “The Stalinist period made it impossible for Marxism to apply its own critical revolutionary method to its own history.” Lubomír Sochor, *A. M. Děborin a dvacátá léta v sovětské filosofii* [A. M. Deborin and the 1920s in Soviet Philosophy]. In A. M. Děborin, *Filosofie a politika*, přel. Lubomír Sochor (Prague: Nakladatelství politické literatury, 1966), p. 505.

<sup>3</sup> In a letter from Robert Kalivoda to Sochor (dated June 21, 1981), one can read the following: “I think that you have the prerequisites to finally compile a proper history of Marxism, which must be *critical* also with regard to Marx and Engels – in the sense that it shows the greatness of their scientific discoveries, but also the metaphysical (primarily Hegelian) narrowness of their focus. It is simply not yet a concrete dialectic (as opposed to a dialectic of the concrete – which is dialectical-metaphysical speculation on concreteness).”

<sup>4</sup> Lubomír Sochor, “Filosofie a ekonomika” [Philosophy and economics], in Jiří Cvekl et al., *Sedmkrát o smyslu filosofie* (Prague: Nakladatelství politické literatury, 1964), pp. 71–99.

In the late 1960s Sochor was publicly and politically engaged, taking an active role in the events surrounding the Prague Spring of 1968. During the course of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia he was elected to the party's Central Committee. After the failure of the reformist endeavours he was expelled not only from the Central Committee but also from the Communist Party entirely. He was subsequently banned from academia, without official permission either to teach at university or to work in any research institution. He started to work as a bibliographer in the library of the Faculty of Law of Charles University, under the surveillance of the secret police (in 1972 he was arrested and briefly imprisoned for disseminating anti-government materials). Although he was isolated in the library, he nonetheless had good access to academic literature. In addition to thoroughly researching the literature of the time relating to political parties, socialist legality, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and theories of revolution, he immersed himself in an intensive study of the theories of elites,<sup>5</sup> and during the same period he also continued to work on his history of Marxism. Along with this he completed his legal education in 1975, defending his Candidate of Science's thesis *Zákaz incestu a československé trestní právo* (The incest prohibition and Czechoslovak criminal law).

In 1978, Sochor left Czechoslovakia to join his family, who were living in France (his second wife was French). He then lived in Paris, where he taught at the *Université Paris VII*, until his untimely death in 1986. He regularly offered courses focusing on Soviet-type societies, such as: iconography, the theory of communication, the role of the mass media, or socialist realism. In addition, he began to work on a new, ambitious book project on the theories of Stalinism. Although only sketches, excerpts, comments, outlines of structure, and a number of annotations have been preserved, on the basis of this material it is nevertheless possible to gain a relatively clear picture of Sochor's overall argument.

His main intention was to thematise Stalinism as an ideology or as a theoretical system with reference to the various forms of its realisation and practical application. Sochor planned to dwell in detail on a genetic examination of Stalinism, as well as on its systematic, ideal-typical reconstruction. Nonetheless, the focal point to his argument seems to be an analysis of the pragmatics of Stalinism. Sochor attempted to rehabilitate methodologically the first person perspective within a study of social reality, since such perspectival accounts were suppressed by intellectual Stalinism. To put it differently, he tried to reach a better understanding of the diverse ways by which individual and collective subjects – who are an integral part of ideologised reality – understand themselves. At the centre of his interest was also the issue of how they practically pursue their own conceptions of the good life.

<sup>5</sup> Ondřej Lánský published a slightly supplemented anthology on the theories of elites, which Sochor prepared in the 1970s. See Ondřej Lánský, Lubomír Sochor (eds.), *Materiály k teorii elit a k její kritice* (Prague: Filosofia, 2018).

Probably Sochor's most extensive paper concerning an analysis of the pragmatics of Stalinism is a study on "real socialism," *Contribution à l'analyse des traits conservateurs de l'idéologie du "socialisme réel."* We reprint it in a slightly abridged version in English and Czech translation. Sochor originally wrote it in French as a publication within the framework of a project on Soviet-type societies that was directed from Vienna by Zdeněk Mlynář.<sup>6</sup>

Sochor understands "real socialism" literally: as a reality that is permeated with ideology, or as a realised ideology. In a situation in which ideology becomes real and reality becomes ideological, ideology is sublated: it is abolished and at the same time preserved (even if in altered form). It is abolished in the sense that the ideological content that acts within and through human consciousness loses its significance. It thus blurs the boundaries between idea and fact, image and portrayed. However, ideology also remains preserved in the form of ritualised practice, which contributes to the constitution and at the same time reproduction of social reality.

In my view, Sochor's core insight is that ideology during the 1970s was progressively voided of its content, formalised, and transformed into a liturgy and repressive ritual. The principal change consists in a reappraisal of the alleged primacy of ideology. Within the context of religion, liturgy or ritual has a more or less ancillary function and is not an end in itself; it serves the religious content. And something similar applies in the case of a political ritual, which serves a certain ideology or doctrine. However, if ideology is realised, or reality ideologised, the relationship of subservience is radically transformed. Now it is ritual that has primacy, while ideology fulfils a mere ancillary function within the framework of liturgy. It is then a question concerning to what extent – if at all – individual or collective subjects, immersed in ideologised reality, are able to realise their concrete visions of the good life within a framework of ritualised practices. It appears that Sochor in his study points to a direction which the search for answers could take: a cultural-anthropological examination of Soviet-type societies – on the basis of an analysis of the various forms of ritualised practices on one hand, and the specific actors who effect them on the other – may reveal to us the extent and the precise ways in which individual or collective subjects realise their visions of the good life, often not despite ideology but in accordance with it.

<sup>6</sup> Lubomír Sochor, *Contribution à l'analyse des traits conservateurs de l'idéologie du "socialisme réel"* (Köln: Index, 1983). It was concurrently published also in German and English by the same publisher. After Sochor's untimely death it was republished under an amended title: *Le "socialisme réel": une idéologie tournée vers le passé* in the Sartrean journal *Les Temps Modernes*. Comp. Lubomír Sochor, "Le 'socialisme réel': une idéologie tournée vers le passé," *Les Temps Modernes* 41 (1985), no. 468/469, pp. 158–238. A Czech translation was made from the last named publication and included in the anthology *Úvahy o ideologii a praxi reálného socialismu* [Reflections on the Ideology and Praxis of Real Socialism], edited by Jan Auerhan, who did the translation. See Sochor, L., *Úvahy o ideologii a praxi reálného socialismu* (Köln: Index 1987).