

A WINDOW INTO SOCIALISM'S LABORATORIES

Matěj Spurný, *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia* (Praha: Charles University Karolinum Press, 2019), 330 p., ISBN 978-80-246-4018-1

Matěj Spurný's book *Making the Most of Tomorrow* is an eruditely written story of the demolition of Most, a medieval royal borough located in the North Bohemian Basin, and the construction of the new Most right across the river. Bridging social and environmental history, the author provides an account of one of the most grandiose infrastructure projects in East-Central Europe. From the 19th century onwards, the town was an important source of coal extraction. With the growing need for energy to feed a developing industry and with natural resources dwindling, it became essential to expand the country's mining sites. And so the long-standing fear of the inhabitants of a town built literally on top of a rich and accessible coal deposit was finally realized in the 1960s. Old Most was to be destroyed and rebuilt next to its original location, leading to the largest socio-technological experiment in the history of the Czech lands. *Making the Most of Tomorrow* presents a fascinating account of the events leading to this act of creative destruction, offering simultaneously valuable insight into the political system, the intellectual traditions of modern urbanism, ecological thinking, and techno-utopianism in socialist Czechoslovakia.

The experimental nature of the whole enterprise resonates in the book's title, although some of its charms are lost in translation from the Czech original. The name of the town translates literally into "bridge", so the English audience cannot fully enjoy the wordplay: *Most do budoucnosti: Laboratoř socialistické modernity na severu Čech* (literally: Most/bridge to the future: A laboratory of socialist modernity in North Bohemia). These minor differences notwithstanding, the title of the book imaginatively evokes the atmosphere of an isolated research room full of notes and blueprints. This is indeed a convincing metaphor for the prevailing mindset of the scientific age of social engineering and techno-optimism. It depicts, in a nutshell, the striving after comprehensive planning and management of social change common across the globe in the second half of the 20th century.

However, as Spurný demonstrates, the process of planning and implementation of the project eventually went far beyond work of the laboratory type. The degree of control that the main proponents of the demolition of Most were seeking turned out to be far beyond their grasp. This argument is well stated by Spurný when he describes the multitude of different actors partaking in the discussions about the project. Not only was there a great diversity of interests and opinions among the representatives of the party-state on every level (ranging from central to local authorities), but also numerous social groups in the 1960s were entering the increasingly open public sphere, including experts of various specializations and positions within the political structure. Spurný convincingly demonstrates the exceptional status of the state-owned SHD mining company (*Severočeské hnědouhelné doly* – North Bohemian Lignite Mines) which, according to his analysis, was responsible for the initial idea of the demolition and *spiritus movens* of the whole enterprise. He provides a captivating description of the political change in the post-Stalinist period, pointing to the emergence of new ways of policy-making marked by a gradual move towards technocratic ideals.

The book is well-structured. It is comprised of five parts, each devoted to a distinct perspective from which Spurný looks at the conceptualization and realization of the described project. This main body of the work is preceded by a comprehensive introduction that sketches both the historical story of Most with a more detailed depiction of the demolition of the old town. The first part addresses the deepening estrangement of the land in which the inhabitants of Most lived their lives. After the expulsion of the Germans, a new collective identity had to be founded on the basis of a resistance to the heritage of the former inhabitants, including the cultural landscape of the borderlands. Spurný thus tells the story of a population deprived of any sense of common identity and belonging. This “uprootedness” was then amplified by the influx of people from all over Czechoslovakia and beyond. The subsequent part concentrates on the material and economic aspects of the grandiose project, stressing the reductionist logic of productivist rationality that reifies nature and the social world. The next two parts provide insight into the intellectual sphere by presenting the demolition of Most in the broader context of utopian thinking and subsequently analyzing the sources of the increasing tempo of criticism of the devastation of nature in Czechoslovakia. The last part discusses the attempts to reconcile the contradictions between the strivings after economic efficiency and the increasing need for the legitimization of the socialist regime.

The book provides an important contribution to several research fields within contemporary history and could also be of high value to historically oriented representatives of other disciplines. First of all, it provides insight into social and environmental history. By setting the case of Most in a wider timeframe, Spurný managed to relate the demolition of the town to the evolution of the social structure of Czechoslovak society from the interwar period onwards. The range of issues addressed is indeed impressive, from housing problems to public health to ethnic minorities. He also touches on some aspects of the cultural and intellectual life of the time. A more general but still

valuable discussion of the interrelation of the power elites and the expert circles offers an intriguing contribution to the history of socialist expertise. Last but not least, the depiction of the struggle between the imperatives of market efficiency and technocratic rationality on the one hand, and the emergent social movements on the other, brings us closer to understanding the making of post-industrial value systems.

The latter is best evidenced by the rise of ecological consciousness in Czechoslovakia, whose description is a valuable part of the book. Spurný manages to link the modernist thinking of the local elites with the worldwide trends in architecture, urban planning, social management, and economics. He writes a story of the triumphs of modernity followed by the emergence of a critique of its alienating and destructive powers. The book provides a well-designed study of how the interrelated preservationist discourses of the natural environment and cultural heritage found their place in the public space of an authoritarian state. The author links this with the broadening spectrum of social groups entering the public space. Covering, in more or less detail, the entire Czechoslovak period, Spurný offers an intriguing insight into the evolution of the legitimization and power mechanisms of state-socialist rule.

As such, the book could open up several discussions that might interest sociologists, environmental and urban studies scholars, as well as political scientists. The case of Most is indeed a radical and thus fascinating example of the challenges of scientific-technological civilization. From this perspective, Spurný successfully argues against the one-sided thesis of state-socialist ideological excesses, demonstrating the complexity of the circumstances which led to the demolition of the old town. The experiment described is rather a telling example of European modernism, “a mirror of the character of modern society, of various forms of alienation and the self-propulsion of the technology and economic development of human beings and their environment as they change” (404).

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