

EDITORIAL

A year has passed since the first volume of *Contradictions* went to press. While that issue appeared on the centenary of the February and October revolutions in Russia, this year sees still other relevant anniversaries: The centenary of the end of the First World War is also the centenary of the post-war settlement, and Poland, the Czech Republic, and (with somewhat greater ambivalence) Slovakia therefore celebrate 100 years of statehood this year, inviting at least some reflection on how different these states were, geographically, ethnically, and in political outlook from their current forms (the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as *separate* states, celebrate a more modest 25 years of independence, a fact generally received with more enthusiasm among Slovak political elites than their Czech counterparts). Perhaps more significantly, this year also sees the 50th anniversary of 1968 – a vital year in the self-image of dissidents of all stripes. While such occasions will be dominated by establishment mythmaking, they also offer opportunities for critical reappraisal of our contemporary societies and the forces that shaped them.

The importance of such reappraisal has only grown in the year since our last publication. Various developments have made the region once again an object of concern for Western observers. Elections in the Czech Republic have seen the continued rise of anti-political billionaire Andrej Babiš alongside new parties of the far right, as well as the re-election of President Milos Zeman in a campaign dominated by hostility to immigration. In Slovakia, protests have led to the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico, long a dominant figure in Slovak politics. Political space appears to be opening for the rise of new political forces, but it remains an open question whether those who step into the void will be preferable to the old guard. The most recent independence day celebrations in Poland saw some of the largest far-right demonstrations in recent European history, while the Law and Justice government has sought to criminalize attempts to discuss Polish complicity in the holocaust. A renewed Cold War-style paranoia has sought to blame Russia for political convulsions from Trump to Brexit, and the leader of the British Labour Party has been accused of being a Czechoslovak spy by a media that could not quite remember whether the latter country still existed!

The last of these is all too typical of this coverage, which may have raised interest in the region and its politics but has done little to raise the intellectual level of its discussion. Two sets of ideas dominate this discussion: The first invokes the language of “populism,” a concept with an important history and lineage, but which is too frequently used as a catch-all that obscures the specific ideological and social bases of diverse

phenomena. Too often, this discourse betrays a disdain for “the people” and a longing for the opportunity to simply dissolve it and elect another. The second dominant set of ideas involves the essentializing of East and West, in which analysis is abandoned for geopolitics and any independent politics is displaced to a battle between Russophilia and Russophobia. At worst, these two sets of ideas merge in a patronizing vision of an unreconstructed Eastern-facing populace reasserting itself against a Western-facing elite. Because neither the East nor the West as it actually exists can save us from our current predicament, it is hard to see where this leads but to despair.

It is thus clearer than ever that an adequate critique of our so-called post-communist present must better understand what created this present, and *Contradictions*, we hope, has begun carving out a space where this can happen. We aim to examine the self-understanding of the movements and forces that produced these societies: the ideals and ideologies of post-communist liberal-conservatism; of dissent; of official and unofficial communism; of the socialist movement that gave birth to official Communist movements and parties but also to their most powerful critics – in other words, of the multiple processes that gave birth to a situation, before 1989–1991, in which the idea of communism would be associated with regimes that suppressed radical socialist thought and engagement, and to a situation after 1989–1991, in which the very possibility of moving nearer to any sort of communism at all would be declared definitively foreclosed.

When we say, therefore, that we live in an age of post-communism, this does not mean that communism once really existed as an established social system and then ceased to exist. The reality to which “post-communism” refers is a reality in which communism was once imaginable and then, for most people, ceased to be imaginable. The terms “communism” and “post-communism” are relevant to us today not because they accurately characterize two successive configurations of society, but because they draw attention to shifting configurations of the desirable and shifting conceptions of the political horizon. The idea of communism has been mobilized as a claim by Communist parties, and the illegitimacy or impossibility of communism has been mobilized as a counter-claim by the parties that subsequently occupied the Communists’ erstwhile seats of power. The problem of post-communism is a problem of untangling claims about social reality from imaginings of possibilities for social change.

Post-communism is, in this sense, a “condition.” It conditions what we are able to imagine and what will be heard when we speak. It conditions our political horizon, making alternatives to the present invisible and closing off spaces of potential emancipation. It conditions our experience of the past and future, associating radical reimaginings of the future with an already-rejected past. And it conditions the critique of the present, demanding that the critique of post-communism come to terms with communism, or at least with what post-communism calls “communism” – the history of “Communist” parties and movements, the ideas they advocated, and the societies they led.

The critique of post-communism calls for a critical look at the pre-post-communist past. It calls for us to look back from the post-communist moment to the history of

all that post-communism positions itself against. Looking at the social systems that legitimated themselves with the ideal of communism, we can ask how those systems functioned, how they emerged and (mostly) “ended,” how they were criticized, and how the legacy of opposition to “actually existing socialism” can inform the contemporary critique of post-communism, as well as the critique of potential alternatives to post-communism. As we look back on the circuitous and often tragic historical developments that led to “communism” and its “end,” we can also look back on the ideas and aspirations that accompanied this history. Rather than delegitimizing these ideas and aspirations *a priori*, we can look at them in their complexity, asking how some ideas took hold but were transformed, how other ideas may have contained from the start the seeds of their own eventual negation, while other ideas were marginalized and never had the chance to be realized.

Our intent is therefore to offer a space for the promiscuous critique of socialist, Communist (that is, Communist Party-affiliated), and “post-communist” thought and practice. “Promiscuous” because the critique comes from close analysis and often from direct experience of the objects of criticism, even while it attempts to transcend those objects’ limitations, enabling us to move beyond the multiple “ends of history” that have come and gone, the multiple moments when the political horizon has been declared closed and finite only to be opened up again. And in addition to being promiscuous, the critique that appears in our pages is also, directly or indirectly, *partisan*: it takes part in the processes it observes, looking not only at domination but also at moments of rupture and liberation. Our authors examine the contradictory potential contained in such ideas as subjectivity and ideology, self-management and nationalization, anti-statism and the welfare state, alternative culture and the dissident ghetto, universal human fulfillment and historically-situated transformation.

Why have we done this by publishing yet another journal? First, because a journal is committed to keeping up with its times, continually renewing its critical attitude with the goal of always being adequate to its present. But while news is fast, theory is slow, and publishing annually allows our authors to take the time to observe developments, reflect, analyze, and finally react. But second, our journal has something specific to say. Ours may not be the first international journal to make it a priority to develop the tradition of critical social thought by engaging with the history of Central and Eastern European socialism, Communist Party rule, and post-communism, but other journals that once filled this role have by now gone in other directions. The old project has remained unfinished.

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In keeping with this commitment, this volume continues our authors’ engagement with the condition of post-communism and the intellectual currents that helped create it. The question is approached most directly in Neda Genova’s review of Boris Buden’s *Zone des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (The zone of transition: On the end of

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post-communism), a book which has still not found its way to English-language readers, though it offers one of the few sustained theoretical attempts to critically understand the phenomenon of post-communism. Peter Steiner, meanwhile, offers a critical look at the post-communist rhetorical engagement of one of the region's most prominent former dissidents, Václav Havel.

In the Czech/Slovak-language section, Matěj Mětelec discusses the significance of the historic dissident movement for the contemporary left, as well as the limitations of both; and Lukáš Makovický examines the work of former dissident G. M. Tamás, who has become a trenchant critic of contemporary society and a once-again-dissident voice in increasingly authoritarian Hungary. The English-language section, meanwhile, approaches dissident thought with three texts on the work of phenomenologist Jan Patočka: two reviews, one by Sergio Mas Díaz and the other by Michaela Belejkaníčová, of recent interpretations of Patočka's political relevance, and an article by Alex Forbes on the meaning of "Europe" in Patočka's thought, against the backdrop of Theo Angelopoulos's film *Ulysses' Gaze*.

Coming from a very different critical tradition, Alain Badiou discusses, in an interview with Jana Beránková, the relationship between his original philosophy and the emancipatory meaning of communism, in light (among other things) of the attempts made around the world in 1968 to wrest communism from the grasp of established Communist Party elites. Dirk Dalberg reviews a recent collection of essays in English translation by the Marxist-humanist philosopher Ivan Sviták, who became one of the Czechoslovak government's fiercest critics before being forced into exile after the defeat of the so-called Prague Spring of 1968. We also publish here the first English translation of an essay by Sviták's contemporary, the philosopher, aesthetic theorist, and intellectual historian Robert Kalivoda, and we print a revised translation (as well as the unpublished original) of a literary-theoretical essay by the surrealist intellectual, and collaborator of both Sviták and Kalivoda, Vratislav Effenberger, whose thought is introduced in an accompanying study by Šimon Svěrák. And Miroslav Tížik reviews (in Slovak) a recent volume on yet another aspect of the reform process in Communist-led society, a project of dialog between reform-oriented Marxists and socially progressive Christians in 1960s Czechoslovakia.

Katarzyna Bielinska-Kowalewska, meanwhile, looks at another attempt to reform a society established in the Soviet mold: in a review of Vladimir Unkovski-Korica's study of Tito's Yugoslavia, she considers the country's tradition of "self-managing socialism" and defends Unkovski-Korica's interpretation of the system as, in fact, a form of "state capitalism." In the Czech/Slovak section, Petr Kužel further explores the meaning of state capitalism in a new entry in *Contradictions'* ongoing "conceptual dictionary." And Martin Nový looks at the interconnection between the state and the liberal capitalism of Western Europe in a Czech-language review of Werner Bonefeld's book *The Strong State and the Free Economy*.

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A series of other texts looks farther into the past, exploring the longer intellectual history of East-Central Europe. In the English section of *Contradictions*, Dan Swain examines the thought of Soviet legal theorist Yegeny Pashukanis as a critical counterpoint to recent left-Rawlsian theories of justice. Two reviews, by Nick Evans and by Vikash Singh and Sangeeta Parashar, discuss the legacy of heterodox economic theorist Karl Polanyi, with attention to his early Hungarian-language writings in comparison with his better-known later writings. In the Czech/Slovak section, Ivana Komanická also looks at the intellectual world of the left-wing Hungarian-speaking intelligentsia after World War I, with a look at the socialist avant-garde and the movement for proletarian culture in Košice (today in Slovakia, then a part of the short-lived Slovak Soviet Republic, affiliated with the Hungarian Soviet Republic, before being incorporated into Czechoslovakia).

The work of Pashukanis and Polanyi raises important questions regarding the interconnection of economic structure, social institutions, and cultural forms. Such questions are explored further by Nicole Pepperell in her critical look at György Lukács's understanding of commodity fetishism, which appears in his work, she notes, as a "false veil of objectivity" that must be pulled back to reveal the true social relations beneath. Pepperell instead proposes a return to Marx's notion of the fetishized commodity as a *real* form of social interdependence. Étienne Balibar looks at the related problem of ideology in its relation to political institutions in an interview with Petr Kužel (here in Czech translation), in which he discusses the thought of Louis Althusser. Herbert Marcuse explores the relationship between capitalism and the aesthetic dimension of human experience in the first Czech translation of chapter 9 of his *Eros and Civilization*. And Nick Nesbitt, also in Czech translation, explores the specific problem of "internal difference" in the musical philosophies of Theodor Adorno and Gilles Deleuze.

Other texts branch out in a number of theoretical directions. In the English section, Norbert Trenkle considers the rise of what he calls "fictitious capital," which, he argues, is increasingly replacing the direct exploitation of labor. In the Czech/Slovak section, Petr Kužel reviews Juraj Halas's book on Marx's contribution to the methodology of the critical social sciences, and Erik Leško reviews a recent book on global inequality by Ondřej Horký-Hlucháň and Tomáš Profant, et al. Vít Bartoš, meanwhile, turns to the natural sciences, arguing, against one tradition of humanist Marxism, in favor of a more sympathetic look at Engels's notion of the dialectics of nature. We also offer a Czech translation of a review essay by Joseph Grim Feinberg that appeared in English in *Contradictions* 2017, on the notions of hegemony and multitude as they appear in the book *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today*.

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Critical and emancipatory theory are inherently optimistic in at least one sense: they see society as always incomplete, full of contradiction and, therefore, full of potential that is never quite exhausted. Critique, as a process that never ends, is a game that is never definitively lost. The same is not true, unfortunately, of the individual human life, and

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we conclude *Contradictions* 2018 with memorials to two important thinkers who passed away since our last volume was released. The first is Italian philosopher and intellectual historian Domenico Losurdo, who, among his many accomplishments, made seminal contributions to the critique of liberalism and the notion of totalitarianism, and to our understanding of the Hegelian contribution to emancipatory theory. The second is Moishe Postone, who not only influenced us with his groundbreaking reinterpretations of Marxism and the original thought of Karl Marx, but who was also, as a member of our international editorial board, an important collaborator of *Contradictions*. Their battles against death could not, in the end, be won, but their work – which has now left their hands and entered the shared process of social critique – has plenty of life still in it.