

EDITORIAL

Thinking Left Dissent

After the fall of state socialism, the central concepts of leftist thought, such as socialism and Marxism, have appeared in concert with the adjective “democratic” as a mere *contradictio in adjecto*, a contradiction in terms. Instead, post-1989 democratic regimes identified with liberal values, which were often defined by unregulated individualism and distrust toward collectivist political models, including various non-Soviet alternatives to liberal capitalism. The same perspective framed the historic role of the Eastern European dissidents, who were chiefly focused on the defense of human rights and political freedoms – that is, on values connected with political liberalism. Connecting the dissidents’ negotiation of a democratic space within a socialist (or even a Marxist) space was practically unmentionable in Central and Eastern European countries after 1989. The postwar experience of (not only) this region casts a shadow over the entire socialist political project and, in the eyes of many citizens, has rendered socialism the antithesis of the political practice of democracy.

This moment has given rise to historical inquiry, primarily because modern democracy has, since the 19th century, been intrinsically bound up with the socialist movement and its various political projects. Of course, this is not to say that the Left has no dark marks in its past, when it denied or disavowed democratic principles, often even radically. On the other hand, the political Left played an indisputable role in spreading democracy worldwide. In its nearly 200-year history, the modern Left has had a hand in establishing democratic constitutionalism, spreading civic, economic, social, and cultural rights, fighting for equality, and propagating respect for differences and social inclusion. Along these lines, in *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*, Geoff Eley goes so far as to identify all democratic negotiation as leftist.¹ However controversial, activist, or one-sided this opinion may seem, the fact of the matter is that the interconnection of the Left, or rather socialism, and democracy is historically incontrovertible, just as the discrediting of leftist concepts after the fall of state socialist dictatorships in Europe is partially understandable.

¹ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Eley studies the long-term development of the European Left and sees that, in Western Europe, the historical domination of socialism over other leftist concepts began to disintegrate in the 1960s with the advent of the so-called new social movements (feminism, pacifism, environmentalism). These assumed the leftist political agenda and, in their emancipatory rhetoric, partially sidelined the classic political categories defining the identity of the Old Left, such as “working class” or “workers’ interests.” The New Left deemphasized this original class analysis and prioritized cultural criticism of various forms of disenfranchisement.

In state-socialist Europe, the situation was understandably different. The anthology *Revolutions for the Future: May '68 and the Prague Spring*, which we review in both the Czech-Slovak and English issue of the current *Contradictions* (by Michal Lipták in the former and by Sezgin Boynik in the latter), traces the different trajectories of 1968 and its legacy in France and Czechoslovakia. No doubt, it is problematic to automatically impose the political categories of Western thought onto an Eastern European context, where political identities and divisions came into being under different conditions. The tradition of democratic thought in East Central Europe after 1968 was linked primarily to the dissident movement, which was long considered to be “non-ideological” thanks to its criticism of official socialist politics. Such a view was also formed by the dominant interpretive framework that mostly connected the dissident movement with so-called nonpolitical politics, or the effort to find consensus across the political spectrum and to build common “pre-political” values. If we are to understand the diverse world of meaning of East Central European dissent, our research must not stop at this assertion. The effort within the human rights agenda to unite various dissident currents against their common enemy did not mean that some dissidents did not continue to politically shape and present their views. The very question of whether human rights and thus also human freedom should be understood only as negative freedom (freedom from), implicating the liberal conception, or as positive freedom (freedom to), as in the socialist conception, formed fundamental divides within the political dissident movement. In the English issue of our journal, an interview with Ilya Budraitskis further illustrates this conflict in the context of Soviet dissidents. Michał Siermiński tackles this very same problem in his book, reviewed for us by Jakub Szumski.

The research paradigm in which we situate *Contradictions* casts doubt on the dominant interpretation of the dissident movement as an ideologically liberal project. Academic discussions betray a glaring and pressing need for “reevaluating” and “rethinking” the history of the dissent, which also leads to new examination of the political thought that emerged in Central and Eastern Europe before the radical transformations of 1989. It has become clear that several socialist political concepts began to form within the dissident movement and that the term Marxist dissent is not, in fact, a *contradictio in adjecto*.

We are chiefly interested in political thought, in the content of criticism, programs and visions, and in their philosophical relevance. We understand the leftist dissent – the value of which the liberal narrative sidelines – as a way of thinking that resists the

liberal interpretation. This, of course, does not mean that we can make our work easier by simply defining the leftism of the dissent as “illiberal.” Such an approach would be as reductive as the original generalizing liberal conception. When scoping out the terrain, we did not restrict ourselves to one limiting definition; instead, we tried to examine the leftist dissent from various perspectives, which together bring this topic – at first glance clearly identifiable but under closer scrutiny multilayered and thus wholly intangible – more fully under our microscope. As such, we endeavored to define the leftist dissent with several mutually interconnected characteristics.

First off, we must emphasize that while the leftist dissent fought against the existing model of socialism, and dissidents often identified with liberal values (for example in respecting human rights), by no means, however, did they identify with capitalism as a socioeconomic order. Given the circumstances of the time, including the threat of various degrees of persecution, enemy number one was always the official – be it the Soviet, Yugoslav or Albanian – model of socialism. However, the rejection of real socialism did not inevitably mean the rejection of socialism *per se*. For example, Inxhi Brisku’s study on the reactions of part of the Albanian party and intellectual elites to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union maps the Albanian dissident efforts. In the translated text “To Be a Marxist in Czechoslovakia” (arranged for publication by Dirk Dalberg), Miroslav Kusý focuses on the Czechoslovak case to trace contemporary evidence of distancing from the official model of socialism. This is also evident in Josef Guttman’s analysis “The Soviet Union - A New Class Society” from 1944 and Egon Bondy’s “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” from 1949/1950, which were both editorially prepared for the Czech issue by Pavel Siostrzonek and Petr Kužel. Both texts present annihilating critiques of the Soviet Union and of Soviet-type societies without renouncing Marxist foundations and socialist ideals. At the same time, they both demonstrate that the term leftist dissent need not be reserved for merely the 1970s and 1980s, as it typically is, and that we can speak about leftist dissent even in years prior. In a similar vein, Peter Bugge, in his contribution, discusses the etymology of this term, its transformations, and its history.

Leftist dissidents did not share a homogenous idea about the socialist social order. Most often, the only common ground in their approaches was their criticism of and delineation against both the existing realization of socialism and capitalism. Naturally, this disparateness was the result of a departure from the ideological canon of the time. Leaving behind the unifying and binding language of official Marxism-Leninism gave rise to considerable heterogeneity, which was fortified by various ideological influences that may have overlapped but never created a singular theoretical or political language for dissident leftist intellectuals. At that time in East Central Europe, it was possible to observe various reactions to and receptions of Maoism, as we see in the text by Kristóf Nagy and Márton Szarvas, who study this phenomenon in the context of radical Hungarian art groups, and in its treatment and development by Egon Bondy, an independent Czech Marxist associated with the underground art scene.

We see the influences of the New Left, along with Trotskyist inspiration, on the Czech radical student group *Hnutí revoluční mládeže* (Movement of Revolutionary Youth), which is presented in Ondřej Slačálek, Micheal Polák, and Matyáš Křížkovský's text. Several Marxist intellectuals that originally worked in official institutions also wound up as dissidents, including Yugoslav philosophers around the journal *Praxis* – outlined by the authorial trio of Gazela Pudar Draško, Milivoj Bešlin, and Balša Delibašić – and German philosophers such as Wolfgang Harich, Robert Havemann, and Rudolf Bahro, whose programs of social change are analyzed here by Alexander Amberger. Ondřej Holub then reviews the Czech translation of Bahro's book *The Alternative*. In the Czech issue, Holub also presents his study on the Slovak Marxist philosopher Rudolf Šíma. Similarly, we cannot leave out the various independent socialist groups that, in the Czech setting, included the Brno group of independent socialists (with which historian Jan Tesař was closely associated and whose book of essays from the time is reviewed for the Czech issue by Václav Skořepa) or the former reform communists, who flirted with Eurocommunism and whose critique of the Soviet socialist model is analyzed by Kristina Andělová for the Czech issue.

Along with the existing socialist order, the official language was also a frequent target of dissident critique (see M. Kusý's text). Yet language is not the same as the conceptual apparatus, and so there was not as strong a need to repudiate Marxist concepts. This is evident as early as in the book *The New Class* by Milovan Djilas, later in *The Open Letter to the Party* by Karol Modzelewski and Jacek Kuroń, and until state socialism's end in the work of leftist dissidents. Intellectual activity at the time was fundamentally defined by, among other things, efforts to purge Marxist terminology of the ideological detritus of the ossified official language; to return to original Marxist terminology as a tool of theory; and to restore the analytic capacity of terms such as revolution, class, exploitation, and division of labor. While theory – whether that of Western Marxism, the New Left, Trotskyism, Maoism, or various local socialist traditions – largely kept to the Marxist terminological arsenal, the visions of political practice differed and diverged according to individual ideological influences. Maoists dreamed of cultural revolution by means of rejecting the old world; radical students envisioned a new society born of true revolutionary change; independent socialists, such as those of the aforementioned Brno group, imagined a symbiosis of leftist and civic principles; exile reform communists bet on Western European communist parties and potential changes in the Soviet Union; and so on. Just as Marxism was reformulated on the level of theory, so too was revolutionary Marxism revived, by various groups, as a union of revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice. While the stability of this union was allegedly, according to the official propaganda, secured by the Communist party, dissident thought understood this connection as the creation of a new, dynamic, and unceasingly revolutionary political power. Along these lines, it was entirely natural for Egon Bondy and Petr Uhl to criticize Soviet society and simultaneously see themselves as Marxists. We explore this duality in Apolena Rychlíková's interview with Anna Šabatová in the Czech issue.

But let us return to the theme we introduced at the very beginning. Much like the contemporary critics of state socialism, we believe that certain Marxist terms still represent useful tools for analyzing today's society and that the almost Sisyphean struggle of the former leftist dissidents to create an equal and just society helps us to take up their legacy (see, in particular, the interview with Anna Šabatová or Wolfgang Harich's critique of growth society as discussed in Alexander Amberger's text). Although we are reviving leftist dissident thought and attempting to read its stories and ideas anew, this does not mean that we intend to heroize it.

For instance, the tendency of many representatives of the *Praxis* school to ethnonationalism (see the text of Gazela Pudar Draško, Milivoj Bešlin, and Baša Delibašić) opens up topics to which we should direct our future criticism. Likewise, we might also address the question of why texts of that time essentially lack any reflection of different forms of oppression, such as gender inequality (a rare anomaly being Blaženka Despot's text, which Zsófia Lóránd editorially arranged for the preceding issue of this journal²). Thus far insufficiently explored leftist dissident thought gives rise to an array of other research topics: for example the dissident concept of solidarity, questions of the critique of labor laws, or later inclinations to various forms of authoritarianism in the region.

Just as this volume of *Contradictions* was going to press, we received the sad news of the passing of Petr Uhl, a lifelong fighter against injustice and a tireless defender of the rights of the oppressed. At this stage it is not possible to publish a full and proper memorial to Uhl, but we would like, at least in these few words, to pay respects on behalf of the editorial board to a man who never compromised his principles and ideals and who, even under the most difficult conditions, never changed who he was. For those of us who come one, two, or even three generations after him, Petr Uhl remains an inspiration. We dedicate this volume of *Contradictions* to him, to rend him honors and thanks for the legacy he left us to build on.

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Translated by Tereza Jonášová

² Blaženka Despot, "Women and Self-Management," introduced by Z. Lóránd, *Contradictions: A Journal for Critical Thought* 4 (2020), no. 2, pp. 141–151.