

DEPARTURES FROM HOME: CZECH PERSPECTIVES ON DIFFERENCE

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In the second half of the 1990s, when I was living in the Czech Republic and conducting ethnographic research in Olomouc and Prague, property ownership and economic affluence more generally were widely recognized as morally charged indexes of difference. This of course is not very surprising. After nearly forty years of state socialism, the rapid transformation of the nation's economic and property regimes produced unprecedented—if oftentimes opaque and mysterious—possibilities for private accumulation, at least for some citizens. Czechs interpreted the re-emergence of a class of owners and private entrepreneurs in different ways. As would be expected in any period of social and economic upheaval, there was a good deal of anxiety around the sudden sense of insecurity and injustice felt by so many citizens, as well as a strong sense of ambivalence—on a personal and national level—about the meanings of the past, present, and future. Some citizens certainly viewed the recreation of a private property regime as both a long anticipated and natural expression of Czech belonging in Europe. At other times, Czech capitalism seemed anything but “normal” (*normální*). The proliferation of large-scale corruption scandals stemming from privatization, the absence of laws to protect property owners and small investors, an aversion to risk-taking, and a rise in petty theft were often viewed as evidence of the backwardness and even futility of Czech capitalism. Czechs commonly indexed such differences produced by the social and economic reforms with a dichotomy familiar across the (post)socialist world: ‘we’ (*my*) honest, moral, hard working but also economically disenfranchised, and ‘they’ (*oni*), individuals characterized by a lack of morals and presumed to be entangled in illicit webs of power, capital, and corruption.¹

I will return to some examples of this dichotomy later. But first I want to draw attention to one theme in particular that I encountered in several different areas of my research: the critique of socioeconomic

difference in terms of Czechness and foreignness, and being “inside” and “outside” the nation. In my study of everyday conversation, popular media, and archival materials, I encountered numerous instances where ownership and affluence were imagined in spatial, territorial, and national terms: ethnicity, emigration, exile, being “outside” as opposed to belonging, and even as something tantamount to national betrayal; in certain situations, affluence was equated, to paraphrase the famous words of the Czech poet Viktor Dyk, with leaving or abandoning the nation, and ultimately even death: “If you leave me, I shall not perish, if you leave me, you will perish...”² In other nations in the region, members of the propertied classes were also subjected to moralizing and speculation about the origins and legitimacy of their affluence but without, it seems, detracting from their national substance. In most cases, probably the opposite was true, since in many nations in the region, the established or emergent economic elite were commonly perceived to be the logical bearers of national identity. Through the abbreviated discussion of several chapters taken from the narrative of twentieth-century Czech property reform, the aim of this short essay is simply to explore some of the ways that class and nation have commingled and collided in the configuration of identity and value in Czech society over time. The consideration of the cultural geography of difference may shed light on why it is that notions of property ownership, affluence, and national substance have endured as mainstays of moral critique in Czech society before, under, and after socialism.³

National(ist) Ambiguities

Treatments of socialist property reform are likely to begin with confiscation of property by the Communist regimes, but in the Czech case the period immediately following the Second World War and preceding the Communist Coup in 1948 was equally formative to the construction of ideas about difference.

Postwar retribution sought to punish ethnic German inhabitants of Bohemia and Moravia for their alleged support for the Nazi regime during the War and, in so doing, transformed private ownership into an idiom for disputes over class, morality, as well as ethnic and national difference. National Front offices staffed by “loyal” Czechs oversaw the confiscation of property, and personal testimonials submitted to the National Front by neighbors and colleagues were used to substantiate individual cases of confiscation. The time was governed by a general climate of lawlessness and the partisan and personal nature of retribution allowed for a great deal of individual discretion in the practice of confiscation. For example, historical records include cases where ethnic Czechs were labeled “German,” charged with complicity with the Nazi regime, and subsequently forced to vacate homes and work places. In both tone and content, the personal testimonials used by the National Front suggest how rumor, envy, personal disputes, and class tensions were as influential, if not more so, than verifiable acts of treason. They also vividly illustrate how, in the absence of the rule of law, the ambiguity of national and moral subjectivities, such as mixed marriages between ethnic Germans and Czechs, facilitated both acts of personal vengeance and socioeconomic mobility.

In one such transcript, entered soon after the end of the Second World War, a Czech property owner named Benjamin Baar lost his home and job on the basis of his alleged support for the Germans. He stood accused by a neighbor of having a German wife; mixed marriages were quite common but alone not the basis for confiscation, but it nevertheless made the more damning allegation that he “danced around a picture of Hitler when the German forces came” seem all the more plausible. In a letter of appeal to the Central National Committee in Olomouc, Baar explained: “...it was really my sister-in-law who had hugged and kissed the soldiers outside the town hall. I told her to quit it. During the occupation I was labeled a Communist and now I’m called a German, but no one can soil my good name. I [as a Czech] always followed the truth and the law.”

The significance of material distinctions in the conceptualization of national and moral identities was revealed in other testimonials from the period. In 1946, Mrs. Vancnerová, also born to Czech parents but married to a German, was

charged with treason and ordered to relinquish her home and land to the National Front. In her appeal, she argued that Nazi officers forced her to “become German” during the War simply because she was married to one. Her file, however, contained several incriminating testimonials, including this one, submitted by her neighbor, Oldřich Kvinta:

My wife, Anežka, went out to the fields and complained that she had to walk in wooden clogs, while Germans got to wear leather shoes. Vancnerová, who was standing outside, overheard the complaint and threatened to report my wife to the Gestapo and have her locked up. Mrs. Pořízková...tried to persuade Vancnerová not to do anything, but she replied that as a German she must report my wife. My wife is indebted to Mrs. Sedlaková that it didn’t happen. She worked as a farm maid, and bribed Vancnerová with lard. Although Vancnerová was a Czech before, during the Protectorate she was a raging German. She went to the director of the gendarme station in Hněvotín to stir up intrigue against Czechs, cursing them as “dogs and bastards,” and at every opportunity she raised a flag bearing a swastika.

While such testimonials were articulated in a rhetoric of national identity, they also gave evidence of struggles over class and power. The loss of homes and jobs, the envious reference to leather clogs, and the utility of bribes illustrate the inextricable link between signs of relative affluence and complicity with foreigners. The persecution of Germans—both ethnic and alleged—created unprecedented possibilities for socioeconomic mobility. Popular support for retribution was fueled by nationalist sentiment, but also perhaps by the envy of a higher standard of living enjoyed by ethnic Germans. Inventories compiled by National Front offices reveal how deportees left behind all of the trappings of a middle class lifestyle: homes, businesses, and land, clothing, household furnishings, down to pairs of socks and wash cloths. Many “loyal” Czechs literally walked into these abandoned homes, professions, and social positions. While the structures of power shifted—Nazi gendarmes, the postwar National Front, and later the Communist National Committee—accusations of foreignness endured as an ever-present threat to property owners and were sufficient grounds for the confiscation of

property.

Building Self and Other

While the Czechoslovak Communist Party was wildly successful in eliminating economic differences among citizens, there were certain notable exceptions within this trajectory. For example, the period following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, which is usually referred to as “normalization” to mark the return of totalitarian politics to everyday life after the brief period of the Prague Spring liberalizing reforms, is also remembered by Czechs for the offer of unprecedented possibilities for material accumulation. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed not only the increasing availability of consumer goods, but the widespread financial and logistical support for do-it-yourself family house construction projects which made it possible for citizens to build relatively spacious and privately owned family houses. Although opportunities for consumption and house-building were welcomed by many citizens, they were also the subject of various critiques. Perhaps the most famous belongs to Havel (1991: 58), contained in his letter to the General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party from April 1975:

People today are preoccupied far more with themselves, their families, and their houses. They fill their houses with all kinds of appliances and pretty things, they try to improve their accommodations, they try to make life pleasant for themselves, building cottages, looking after their cars, taking more interest in food and clothing and domestic comfort. In short, they turn their main attention to the material aspects of their private lives.

To Havel, such banal domestic preoccupations were indicative of “the gradual erosion of all moral standards” and in particular of a silent contract between the state and citizens: “Think what you like in private; as long as you agree in public, refrain from making difficulties, suppress your interest in truth, and silence your conscience, and the doors will be wide open to you.” His critique of this moral predicament and its symptoms—the widespread obsession with consumer goods, family houses, and weekend cottages—exposed the hidden dynamics of power operating behind the veneer

of everyday life in normalization Czechoslovakia. In this economy of shortage, he and other dissidents argued, the efficacy of state power lay not in the ability to exercise control through overt violence but rather to create “adapted” citizens willing to forgo public responsibility, resistance, and living “in truth” in exchange for otherwise scarce commodities and the maintenance of a more comfortable material and private life.

Also emerging from Havel’s critique is a moral geography that became the basis for a more general imagery of the final decades of Czech socialism. For example, the increasing availability of consumer goods was credited with fostering a state of “inner emigration” (cf. Wheaton and Kavan 1992), depicted in both spatial terms, such as the flight from public to private life and from cities to weekend cottages but also in terms of social responsibility, which was evident in an increased toleration of petty corruption and passive support for the state. This notion of “inner emigration” is especially significant because of the less than tacit reference to the thousands of Czech citizens who emigrated abroad after 1948 and again after 1968, who were sometimes criticized for “abandoning the nation or running away... for a better life” [*uteci (...za lepším)*] or renouncing one’s birth [*odrodit se*] in contrast to citizens who “stayed” (Holy 1996).

While house builders viewed their projects as testaments, in mortar and stone, to positive and moral values such as diligence, thriftiness, and control of self and family, they were acutely aware of the rumors about them circulating in their local communities, especially among citizens who did not build—about the use of pilfered construction materials, or devoting official working hours to such private and selfish pursuits. Accordingly, emigration “inward” and “outward” both constituted moral transgression, and, accordingly, the use of political connections, bribes, or illicit behavior to obtain building permits, labor, and materials in these domestic projects was equated to abandonment of the nation. Both forms of transgression, it was argued, placed the possibility for relative personal enrichment over collective interests.

Returns

Moral critiques of ownership and national identity were re-introduced into public

debate with the passage of property restitution laws in 1990, which enabled the return of land, homes, and small businesses to presocialist owners. The legitimacy of private ownership established through Czech restitution was particularly contentious due to the exclusion of certain categories of citizen from filing claims. First, restitution attempted to recreate the property regime that existed in 1948, when the Communist Party came to power, rather than to redistribute property. Only so-called “original owners” could file claims to property, a category that excluded sitting tenants, lease holders, and other legal users of property under socialism. Thus, while some citizens found in property restitution social justice as well as new financial possibilities, for others the program represented loss, negated contracts, and uncertainty. This omission was the source of anxiety and tension, not least of all because it charted a new moral divide between property owners and citizens without claims to property in a society that shared a deep sense of collective victimization by the Communist regime. Second, claimants were required to be both citizens and permanent residents, which effectively excluded the émigré who relinquished or was stripped of Czechoslovak citizenship during the socialist period, often under conditions of duress. One of the fathers of Czech privatization, in an interview several years later, described this omission as “one of the biggest and most flagrant errors...both a moral and pragmatic mistake” and explains that in Parliament, “...an aversion towards émigrés won, and even a bit of envy, that they left and did well, while we had to live in this communist shit hole” (Husák 1997).

In my interviews with property owners in Prague, I found examples where the legitimacy of private ownership was articulated in terms of this so-called aversion towards émigrés. Eva, a middle-aged woman I met at Prague’s Civic Association of Homeowners, grew up in an apartment house perched at the top of a winding hillside street in the city’s Smíchov district. Soon after Eva’s family’s house was confiscated in 1961, her parents emigrated to Germany and she followed several years later, only to return to Prague in 1990. Her subsequent claim to the house was met with hostility among tenants, who either disputed the legitimacy of the status of private ownership produced through restitution, or were simply fearful of being evicted.

On my first visit to the house, Eva brought me to a room full cardboard boxes propped up against one wall, each containing files and papers documenting the legal disputes between her and the tenants in the apartment house. In one flat, a young couple had not paid rent in months; across the hall, a mother and daughter would not grant a repairman access to their apartment to fix a leak stemming from a rigged up shower that had already damaged the ceiling in the apartment below; upstairs, an elderly couple had “transferred”—or rather sold—their lease to a distant relative without Eva’s knowledge or approval. Eva’s attempts to reach out of court settlements with her tenants failed, and each of her numerous lawsuits had been tied up in court for years. She also faced both indifference and disdain in encounters with bureaucrats, police officers, and judges. “As soon as you introduce yourself as a homeowner, the conversation is over,” she told me. But in Eva’s view, it was not simply her status as homeowner but as a Czech who lived in Germany that was the source of both suspicion and fear. One way that tenants and others challenged the legitimacy of her status as owner was through the interrogation of her citizenship and status as a returning émigré.

Eva recalled one instance when a judge, in the middle of hearing one of her lawsuits against a tenant, all of the sudden inquired whether Eva happened to possess any citizenship other than Czech. “What is it to them?” she wondered. And, during a subsequent meeting with me, she recalled this exchange between her and the elderly couple on the top floor: “I was discussing something with Mrs. H., I don’t remember what it was about, maybe cleaning out the attic, and all of the sudden her husband said: ‘We’re not interested in hearing what someone who has lived for so many years in Germany has to say about anything.’ So I said to them: ‘Well, why don’t you go and travel yourself?’ And she replied, ‘*We* are happy here.’” The ambiguity of “we,” which included not just Mrs. H. and her husband but “all tenants in the house,” and perhaps also “all of us who stayed,” was not lost on Eva, while “here” directly invoked “the nation.” For Eva, like for Czechs who both left and stayed, emigration was a source of deep ambivalence. Emigration was simultaneously a sign of moral superiority for not enduring or allowing oneself to be tainted by a corrupt regime and also of moral weakness for abandoning the nation. Similarly, “staying”

evoked moral rectitude for withstanding socialism while also indicating, for most citizens, at least a certain degree of complicity with the Communist regime. Eva had expressed a sense of superiority over the tenants because of her experiences in Germany, yet her fixation on two moments when her absence was brought into question suggest that such inquiries and comments might have also been perceived as challenges to her own sense of legitimacy as owner.

Corruption and Difference

In this last section, I want to turn to representations of corruption in the postsocialist Czech media for a final set of images of foreignness tied to emergent differences in ownership and wealth. In the second half of the 1990s, the copious public discourse on corruption provided a useful lens through which to explore many salient issues in Czech society, including debates about the meanings of Europe, emergent socioeconomic differences, and social justice. Topics included Czech ties to international organized crime, real estate development scams, and the fraudulent privatization of state companies. Here, I want to turn briefly to one particular mode of corruption known as *tunelování* (“tunneling”) the large-scale liquidation of the capital and holdings of a company, bank, or investment fund and the tunneler (someone who tunnels) to consider how representations of *tunelování* engaged the more durable subjectivities that both united and divided Czechs after socialism.⁴

Under socialism, Czechs, like citizens of other nations across the region, commonly used pronominal dichotomies to express a broad range of morally based solidarities and distinctions: “they,” the factory directors, party functionaries, and politicians, and “us,” the honest, hard-working, “ordinary” people. After socialism, Czechs were still divided along relations to power, but membership in these categories had expanded to include new social and economic conditions. In both vernacular and more analytic contexts, Czechs drew upon these subject positions in their analyses of wealth, business, and corruption. One author put it this way: “Czechs do not like wealthy people. They think that they got all of their money illegally, by abusing imperfect laws, or from tunneling. For three-quarters of the nation, ‘wealthy person’ and ‘criminal’ are synonymous.” The author stressed

that tunnelers are not “ordinary” Czechs, but “them,” big businessmen, commonly criticized for their arrogance, immorality, and illicit wealth. Letters to the editor of the national newspapers also expressed the view that socialist privilege had been reproduced through privatization: “The nouveaux riche, who raked it in under the Bolsheviks and today continue to accumulate more property, follow the slogan ‘rake in even more!’” Other readers stressed that tunnelers were not “normal,” in the sense of ordinary people without connections to politics and capital: “A normal Prager is someone who has neither restituted [property through privatization] nor tunneled anything.” Tunnelers were not only portrayed as “others” but also as undermining national aspirations of joining Europe by drawing international attention to the many pitfalls of privatization, the lack of adequate enforcement of laws, and to the putative tolerance for corruption in the Czech Republic, all of which have been major stumbling blocks to the EU integration process.

Yet like shifters in linguistic analysis, the values of “we” and “they” were not fixed and the capacity for reversing them was vividly expressed in this bifurcation of Czech society: “One tunnels and the other complains...it’s like in the 1970s and 1980s, when one group emigrated while the other was making preserves and pickling vegetables.” Here, “we” expresses the durable self-stereotype of Czechs as politically passive and apathetic critics who emigrated “inward,” to their private lives and jars of preserves, drawing parallels between Havel’s critique of post-1968 consumption and emigration “outward” to the West. “We” were also referred to as *Cechákové* (a pejorative diminutive form of Czech denoting small mindedness and provincialism). Tunnelers were “informed, worldly, courageous, and risk-taking, and active agents in ‘the big world of finance.’” As bearers of the coveted qualities thought to be lacking among more ordinary citizens, such as the ability to take care and demonstrate something of oneself, tunnelers were able to stand up to arrogant Western capitalists and, in so doing, became *naši* [ours]. Ultimately, these “positive” –albeit satirical and tongue in cheek—references to tunnelers suggest one possibility for transcending this entrenched moral divide. One author noted that the only difference between “us” and “them” is the amount one steals: “He who can’t steal in large amounts can at least steal in small ones...in a country where

theft works as smoothly as an assembly line, it is only logical that people are drawn to it. Otherwise they are left feeling incomplete, like something isn't right. It's a national pastime and a rather convenient one, so why not join in?"

In bringing together corruption and other forms of socioeconomic difference, I am not suggesting any sort of moral parity among them. Rather, the aim of this paper has been to bring together, at least in a tentative way, historical and contemporary references to property ownership and wealth that have been depicted in terms of being "inside" and "outside" the nation through references to emigration, exile, and foreignness, which, taken together, represent something of a lateral perspective on socioeconomic difference. The cultural geography I have in mind is best put by Sayer's (1998: 320) description of the Czech "home(land)" as "a place difficult to leave and still more difficult to return to, a protective family circle, outside which there is eternal fall and no redemption: a take-it-or-leave it, all-or-nothing kind of place." With issues of national belonging and substance at stake, we may better understand why socioeconomic difference has endured as such a moral problem in the Czech configuration of identity and value.

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Endnotes

¹ See Gal and Kligman (2000) for one study of the workings of pronominal dichotomies in socialist and postsocialist contexts.

² These are the famous final lines of Dyk's 1917 poem *Země mluví* ("The Land Speaks"). Derek Sayer (1998) provides a very interesting treatment of this and other works by Dyk and their many resonances in Czech culture.

³ Due to limits of space, I can only provide a cursory overview of these periods, but each receives fuller treatment in Altshuler (2001b).

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of corruption and tunneling in the Czech Republic, see Altshuler (2001a).