

# Cahiers du CEFRES

N° 30, Le communisme à partir des sociétés = Communism from the viewpoint of societies

Muriel Blaive (Ed.)

---

Muriel BLAIVE

**Communism from the viewpoint of societies**

---

Référence électronique / electronic reference :

Muriel Blaive, « Communism from the viewpoint of societies », Cahiers du CEFRES. N° 30, Le communisme à partir des sociétés = Communism from the viewpoint of societies (ed. Muriel Blaive).

Mis en ligne en / published on juillet / july 2010

URL : [http://www.cefres.cz/pdf/c30/blaive\\_2006\\_communism\\_viewpoint\\_societies.pdf](http://www.cefres.cz/pdf/c30/blaive_2006_communism_viewpoint_societies.pdf)

Editeur / publisher : CEFRES USR 3138 CNRS-MAEE

<http://www.cefres.cz>

Ce document a été généré par l'éditeur.

© CEFRES USR 3138 CNRS-MAEE



## *Communism from the Viewpoint of Societies*

Muriel Blaive

This edition of the *Cahiers du CEFRES* is the result of a series of lectures organised at CEFRES during the autumn of 2004 under the title of *Communism from the Viewpoint of Societies*. They brought together Sandrine Kott and Dalibor Státník on the theme of socialist work groups, Martine Mespoulet and Marie Černá on that of women in socialism, and Catherine Perron, Zdena Vajdová and Jiří Kabele on the local elites at the time of the fall of communism.

Why this title of "Communism from the viewpoint of societies" and not, more simply, "the social history of communism"? Because we were aware of the fact that the social history of this period is still not very well developed in the former communist countries, for at least two reasons: the difficulty of accessing the sources and the prevalence of methodologies and patterns of thinking that do not devote much space to anonymous citizens. The former German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) forms an exception, and the contribution by Sandrine Kott is the only one that can be classified without any difficulty under "social history". In this case as in the others, our objective is to show that an approach placing society at the centre of the analysis can be a useful one, that it offers a view of the subject that is new and different from that of political history, and that it enables us to ask discerning questions about the communist period.

### *The advantage of a social approach to history*

For social history does not have to demonstrate its usefulness. Before it appeared, the source, in particular archive documents, was the cornerstone of historical argumentation. Leading personalities and political and military history had priority. Reflection on the status and objectiveness of the written document was not considered to be crucial.

Social history did not develop until the emergence of sociology at the beginning of the 20th century. The importance of society and its anonymous members, the ordinary people, as protagonists in their own right, gradually took shape. The Annales movement, which appeared in France at the end of the 1930s, rejected positivism and heralded the end of history understood as the description of political events. It endeavoured to open history up to the other social sciences and thus to bring the infinite complexity of society into the field of its analysis.

In this way the word "issue" made its appearance. The historian was no longer the one who knew but the one who tried to grasp the behaviour of people in motion, and not by means of a fixed portrait. New approaches appeared, notably oral history. The archive document was still of great importance, but at the price of an in-depth reflection on its ins and outs. From now on, the mentality, culture, civilisation, and importance of the economic situation were all taken into account. The wall between the past and the present had come down: from now on it was admitted that the past lived in the rhythm of the present and that the historical analysis of the past was dependent on the context in which it was produced, in other words dependent on the present. The present was the consequence of the past, but the past was itself, in a certain way, the consequence of the present.

In the 1970s, the "history issue" arrived, bringing with it a new conception of time: what had not happened became just as important as what had happened; the non-event provided competition for the event;<sup>1</sup> the social movements and their temporalities were seen in a more

---

<sup>1</sup> A paradigm, incidentally, within which our doctoral thesis was situated (see *Une déstalinisation manquée. Tchécoslovaquie 1956*, Bruxelles, Complexe, 2005, in Czech *Promárněná příležitost*, Prague, Prostor, 2001), for

differentiated way, thus forming a sort of "layering" of history. History became a jigsaw puzzle in time and space, which the historian had to piece together and in which society played a key role. This kind of approach is relatively infrequent in contemporary Czech history, and it seemed to us to be worth trying to encourage an exploratory form of it.

The second reason for this choice of theme is due to a certain opportunism. The fact is that "transitology" does not seem to us to provide a really convincing explanation for the jolts experienced by post-communist society, a difficulty that we put down to its reluctance and complete inability to base itself on sound studies of society under communism. We could take as an example of phenomena that are difficult to explain the continuing success of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia on the Czech political scene: as Françoise Mayer says, "Curiously, the Czech communists, for whom no political future could be seen after 1989 because their past 'disqualified' them, have reconstructed their identity by basing themselves on this past instead of shrugging it off [in particular the Sudeten German issue]. Here we have to do with the unusual phenomenon of communist continuity, which is difficult to account for as it fails to fit into the category into which the direction taken by communists in Central Europe since 1989 is most commonly considered to belong, that of transformation."<sup>2</sup>

The necessity for a social approach cannot be better emphasised than in the phrase by Jacques Rupnik, "The support and loyalty from which the unreformed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia continues to benefit raises the disturbing question of the links between Czech society and the communist past."<sup>3</sup> Moving beyond the Czech Republic, we might equally well mention the veritable social movement that came into being in Poland with the aim of erecting a monument to the memory of Edward Gierek, the first secretary of the Polish Communist Party in the 1970s, in direct contradiction to the myth of an enduring Polish resistance to communism.<sup>4</sup>

The third and final reason for choosing this theme is of a practical nature. In all the former communist countries, the political history of the period after 1945 has developed to the detriment of social history for an additional reason that is rarely mentioned: the political history of communism is absolutely fascinating. Take for example the political trials in the 1950s, the policy of terror, the destalinisation introduced by Krushchev and his famous "secret speech", the Hungarian revolution, the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Czechoslovak Prague Spring, Solidarity and the declaration of the state of war in Poland, the dissident movements and the various scenarios for the fall of communism: these events are so striking that they could not fail to attract the attention of the public and of academics during several decades. The Cold War itself was an eminently political phenomenon. Nevertheless, it seems that it is time, and this is what will concern us here, to put political history back in its context and to start to reconstruct the social dimension of the communist phenomenon.

### ***The confrontation of methodologies***

---

which the working title was for a long time *1956 : l'année des "non-événements" en Tchécoslovaquie*. Very few Czech commentators have accepted or even recognised this paradigm, and have mostly plugged away at highlighting political "events" (such as the Writers' Congress, the action taken by the students, the repression, etc.), without understanding that they had been deliberately left to one side to the advantage of a social approach.

<sup>2</sup> Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme*, Paris, EHESS, 2003, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rupnik, "Politika vyrovnávání s komunistickou minulostí" [The politics of coming to terms with the communist past], *Soudobé dějiny*, 1/2002, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Izabella Main, "Memory and History in the Cityscapes in Poland: The Search for Meaning", *Junior Fellows Conference*, Vol. XVII, 2005, note 57 (the text can be downloaded from [http://www.iwm.at/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=301&Itemid=276](http://www.iwm.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=301&Itemid=276)).

Each of the contributions presented here sheds light on society under communism in its own way. That of Sandrine Kott, first of all, comes from her remarkable work *Le communisme au quotidien*<sup>5</sup>, which describes the emergence and development of the movement of the socialist work groups in the GDR.

The interest of this text lies in the methodological model it constructs. In her attempts to avoid the trap of the highly ideologised archives, the author was not content with simply banishing the communist propaganda; a subtler approach, reading between the lines, enabled her to decode not just the communist presentation, but also the real basis, which did in fact exist, on which this presentation drew in order to acquire at least a semblance of legitimacy.

At no point is there any question of deciding whether the East Germans really "believed" in the work groups; such an attempt would have been completely futile and in any case impossible. What was crucial, on the other hand, and what Sandrine Kott has been able to achieve by zigzagging between propaganda, displayed behaviour and belief that was perhaps sincere, was to bring out the fact that the official propaganda promoting the work groups was based on a genuine social demand on the part of the workers for collective participation in the running of the economy. This incidentally explains the relative success of the work groups in East Germany in comparison with a country like Czechoslovakia.

Dalibor Státník, for his part, shows that socialist work groups did not arouse any enthusiasm in Czechoslovakia and were never "accepted" by the workers, for whom they represented simply a clumsy propaganda manoeuvre. But his paper is worth spending time on because it illustrates the methodological and psychological difficulties encountered by a large proportion of contemporary Czech historians when dealing with the communist period. The author's thesis is in fact better documented by his explicit refusal to tackle the question of the socialist work groups in Czechoslovakia than by a genuine demonstration based on empirical research.

In fact, we find ourselves confronted by a rejection of any form of social approach. It is particularly revealing that Dalibor Státník cites the French history schools and displays a certain desire to go beyond the classical interpretative schemes that continue to maintain a hold over contemporary Czech historiography. His sincerity allows us to follow the internal conflict he has gone through: to agree to work on the socialist work groups for our series of seminars, even though his colleagues and his intellectual and overall environment impose a certain reserve, not to say a total defiance, with regard to a research theme of this nature. However, the final text, which makes a number of detours via the mass movements in the Soviet Union before finally only discussing briefly the socialist work groups in Czechoslovakia, and then only from an institutional point of view, shows us that he has not managed to completely overcome this reluctance. Can we trace its origin?

It is because, together with a large number of his colleagues, Dalibor Státník is unable to leave behind him a historical approach based on "events". Now if history only consists of events, then society, daily life, the ordinary citizen, and mentalities lose the greater part of their interest. In addition, although being aware of these ideas in a formal way, Dalibor Státník does not adopt the methodology of history as it exists today, at least in France (although admittedly it has only existed in this form for two or three decades): what is important for historians is not being able to "stand back" from the subject, it is not whether they have lived through the period they are studying, but it is dealing with issues, in other words being able to ask the essential questions, the answers to which will make a significant contribution to the understanding of the period that is being studied.

In this way, both those who have lived under the communist regime and those who have not experienced it, or even, in more general terms, those who are strangers to the context that

---

<sup>5</sup> Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien*, Paris, Belin, 2001.

they are studying, are all perfectly justified in carrying out research and arriving at interesting results.<sup>6</sup> To put it another way, there is no need at all to have taken part in the work groups in person in order to be able to critically examine the propaganda relating to them.

This leads us to a second methodological problem affecting contemporary Czech historiography: the status of infallibility granted to documents in archives. Actually, and it is here that the encounter between different methods may give rise to confusion, the development of historical methodology in France has been accompanied by an increasingly critical reflection on the positivist belief in sources. If Sandrine Kott had tackled the question of the socialist work groups in the GDR while still being dominated by a conception in terms of "truth" and "lies", Dalibor Státník would have been justified in evaluating the undertaking with scepticism.

It is important to overcome this problem of lack of understanding between different academic cultures, for, in reality, the work of the historian is understood to consist essentially of "placing in context", which includes several components: grasping the relative character of the different positions – whether they are those of the victims, the tormentors, or others – and reconstructing the issues, and "analysing" and not being content with a simple description. In other words, it is a question of defining to an increasingly greater extent the issues involved and not to try to discover a "truth" that no longer has any absolute importance – as is incidentally the case with Czech historiography of periods that are more distant than that of communism.<sup>7</sup>

If we accept that the relevance of the "truth" needs to be re-evaluated, then this will certainly remove scruples about tackling the social history of communism. And even if we leave aside the work groups, there are other sources of legitimacy that the communist regime was able to base itself on that could be studied to advantage, such as the wish for social egalitarianism, the affirmation of the democratic Czech nation at the time of the Prague Spring, or the guarantee of a relatively high standard of living.

### ***Social history seen by sociologists***

The fact remains that up until now it is only the sociologists, who are not affected by this rigid relationship with archive documents, and do not have a complex about conducting interviews, that have devoted themselves to this history of society under communism in the Czech Republic. And the results are extremely interesting: both Catherine Perron and Zdena Vajdová with their study of workers in Kladno<sup>8</sup> and Jiří Kabele in the case of the countryside show that the regime was well established and would have meandered on for many more peaceful days had it not been for the geopolitical upheavals that started in the USSR before spreading to the other socialist countries.

The use of the term "transfer of power" instead of that of "revolution" is very explicit in this regard, in both cases, as if we were witnessing a process of involuntary and unstoppable "globalisation" of the democratic institutions; the revolution did not occur because the local protagonists ardently wanted it, but because it was impossible for the provinces to ignore what

---

<sup>6</sup> A painful truth that French historians, too, had to take on board when the work of an American historian was published that significantly called into question existing views on issues relating to the Vichy regime and collaboration. See Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944*, New York, Random House, 1972.

<sup>7</sup> For an instructive demonstration of the relative nature of "historical truth", see Jiří Rák, "Národ božích bojovníků" [The nation of God's warriors], in *Bývalí Čechové*, Prague, H+H, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Their article was partly inspired by the excellent work by Catherine Perron, *Les pionniers de la démocratie. Élités politiques locales tchèques et est-allemandes 1989-1998*, Paris, PUF, 2004.

was going on in Prague, just as it was impossible for Prague to ignore what was going on in the GDR, Poland and Hungary.

However, Catherine Perron and Zdena Vajdová add to these considerations an element of reflection that is particularly interesting: at least some of the managers of the socialist economy (in the case of the large enterprise Poldi) would have been more or less in favour of a change, in view of the progressive exhaustion of socialist resources. Does this mean that the progressive erosion of the standard of living was bound to lead to a reform process similar to that which took shape in the 1960s, and consequently that the trauma of the post-1968 "normalisation" was in the process of being overcome? A definitive answer to this question will not be found here, but at least it has been asked.

There remains the issue of women under socialism, which provides a concrete illustration of the failure of the communist ideology. It was intended that women would become the equal of men: in reality, they were subjected to the same professional pressures without any lightening of their domestic load to compensate for this. Martine Mespoulet gives an excellent description of the case of Soviet women, even if we can only regret the disappearance in her text of the colourful "divorce by postcard" that she mentioned in her oral presentation and which symbolised so well the utopian character of relations between men and women. Similarly, the division of tasks between the sexes was not abolished but redefined.

Exaggerating a little, her text and that of Marie Černá show that the communist societies finally arrived at a consensus with their regimes based on values that were not revolutionary but more petit bourgeois, with results that were materially comparable with those of Western countries. Marie Černá reports how a Hungarian official said that a woman's role was to "smile nicely". She also points out that the issue of women was not present on the dissident agenda any more than it was on that of the regime, and for the same reason: they did not want to split the common interest.

This conclusion is depressing, but it constitutes an interesting epitaph for a communist epoch that undoubtedly produced more social consensus than it is comfortable to admit. All in all, it forms an additional and final justification for our undertaking.