Ethnic and class membership assignments: Slovak workers are a kind of people

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Abstract
Drawing upon Rita Astuti, this paper shows that Czech identification is unavailable in many contexts of the contemporary Czech Republic for migrant workers as alternative identification is not allowed by the official discourse. The notion of Czechoslovak identity, or any larger umbrella category, that would enable workers escape the stigma trap lack elites that would mobilize people into "imagined communities". This article suggests that the reason for this is that the definitions are short of essential aspects, leaving migrant factory workers symbolically and often socially outside the "Czech community".

Keywords
Slovak workers, ethnicity, ethnic theory, identity, Czech nationalism

INTRODUCTION

Czechs and Slovaks are names for two sets of historical, political, and cultural concepts. They vaguely refer to two peoples living in the territories of two small states[1] — the Czech and Slovak republics — in east-central Europe. Both post-socialist states have distinct official histories, languages, national narratives, and symbolisms, yet once formed a single nation-state based on a conception of a single historic and cultural nation: Czechoslovaks. In this article, I analyse the possibilities of, and obstacles to, Czech identification in everyday life for Slovak migrant workers in today's Czech context, that is, from the perspective of a Slovak citizen living in the Czech Republic and working as a factory worker. This is neither a complex survey of the theories of class and ethnicity nor a summary of the historical processes creating ethnic and national identities.[2] My purpose is to show the factors that may structure ethnic identification and ethnic indifference in today's east-central Europe. Based on Rita Astuti's (1995) suggestion that identity may be not a kind of essence, but a culturally transferred activity learned in the course of social interaction, this paper shows that

1 The population figures are approximately 10 million in the Czech Republic and 5 million in Slovakia.

2 This is not a comprehensive review of the Czechoslovak question. For the history of Czechoslovakia in English, see Krejčí and Machonin (1996), Williams (1997), Cornwall and Evans (eds., 2007), Orzoff (2009), and Heimann (2011). See also Leff (1988, 1996) and Leff and Mikula (2002). For Czech and Slovak nationalism, see Bookman (1994), Holý (1996), Hilde (1999), and Brock (1976). For Slovak history, see Seton-Watson (1924), Lettrich (1955), Kirschbaum (2007), Johnson (1985), Henderson (2002), and Mannová (ed., 2000). For post-socialist developments, see Wolchik (1991), Wheaton and Kavan (1992), Szomolányi and Gould (eds., 1997), Bútorová (ed., 1998), and Whitefield and Evans (1999).

the possibilities of acting as a Czech depend on the availability and significance of the concepts of Slovak/Czech/Czechoslovak-ness, the state's official discourse, and the widely adopted ideology of class and ethnicity based on essentialized similarities. Although class, ethnic and national identities are neither primordial nor fixed, the choices of an individual are strongly limited by the situation. This situational approach to ethnicity[3] restricts — rather than widens — the possibilities for free identification or indifference. In the end, in the context of the present-day Czech Republic, Slovaks and Czechs are two kinds of people, while the concept of *Czechoslovak* is denied this cultural, historical, and biological essence, making people acting as Czechoslovaks deviant, rather than loyal ethnic members.

CZECHS, SLOVAKS, AND CZECHOSLOVAKS

In a short 1919 article published in *Naše řeč* ("*Our Speech*"),[4] a journal devoted to linguistic issues, the editor alerted readers that the public use of the official name for the people of the newly established Czechoslovak state was not appropriate:

> ...why do we introduce the terrible word Czechoslovak ... [when we could use] Czechoslav, which refers to a Czech Slav, while a Czechoslovak is a Czech Slovak that is, a Slovak residing in the Czech lands. But if our paper uses "Czechoslovak" as designating something entirely different, i.e. Czechs and Slovaks; this word should be written in a different manner, that is "Czecho-Slovak", "Czecho-Slovaks" in plural...Compare Austria-Hungary, Serbo-Croat war etc.

This early contribution is just one of many examples illustrating the fact that the definition of Czechoslovaks has had some difficulties in social practice, and that the existence of a single Czechoslovak nation-state was based on an overambitious and largely unsuccessful project of promoting Czechoslovak identification.[5] The Czechoslovak-born sociologist Joseph Slabey Roucek wrote in his 1934 paper on migrant communities in the USA that, "A distinction must be made between the Czechs and the Slovaks..." (p. 611). Although he identified certain common features of a Czechoslovak way of life as opposed to an American one,[6] he showed that the dichotomiza-

3 For a review of the situational approach to ethnicity, see Okamura (1985).
4 Čechoslovák (1919) *Naše řeč* [http://nase-rec.ujc.cas.cz/archiv.php?art=546]. The journal emerged in 1916; its contents were made available online at [http://nase-rec.ujc.cas.cz/archiv.php].
5 There are cases in history of similar projects that were successful, such as Swiss identification (see Weber (1921, 1946: 173).
6 "[T]heir attempts to imitate the American standards of living are rather pathetic, because many features recognized by the Czechoslovaks born abroad as the symbols of distinction are glaringly evident. Thus we find that such Czechoslovaks buy a large house but spend most of their time, whether for meals or for leisure in their kitchen — as in Czechoslovakia" (Roucek, 1934: 615).

tion was widespread and reproduced by antagonism and separatism organized by distinct Czech and Slovak "clubs, societies, associations, and churches" (p. 618) offering many people working positions, further reinforcing the Czech-Slovak divide and delaying assimilation, as people employed in these positions are "the ones who delay the process of assimilation and insist very vociferously on the old ways" (p. 616). Roucek's article showed not only the irrelevance of the Czechoslovak category in terms of learned behaviours, but also increased the social importance of Czech and Slovak dichotomization, especially in terms of everyday and professional activities when migrants spoke only Czech or Slovak. As soon as people managed to learn English and acquire a position provided by "the American environment" (p. 617), they dissociated with immigrant communities, transforming Czechoslovaks into a lower social class, rather than a cultural identification.

Writing in 1916, two years before the Czechoslovak state was founded, US-based philologist Carl Darling Buck observed a similar dichotomization. Although he identified that the "Slovaks of northern Hungary are closely akin to the Bohemians [and] simply the eastern extension of the population of Bohemia and Moravia" (p. 59), and that one could imagine their unification in the future, the divided history in two separate state formations (Austria and Hungary) and a distinct Slovak cultural movement had made the Slovak and Bohemian categories distinct.

CZECHOSLOVAKS AS "AMPHIBIANS"

The notorious anthropological definition of culture says that it "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor in Bodley 1999: 8). The anthropological concept of culture is "superindividual and superorganic" (Kroeber 1963: 61). Culture affects all human behaviour; "[w]hat man thinks, feels, and does is determined by his culture. And culture behaves in accordance with his own laws" (White 1949: 344). White further states that, "...if one wishes to explain culture scientifically, he must proceed as if culture made itself, as if man had nothing to do with the determination of its course or content. [...] It rests upon its own principles; it is governed by its own laws" (p. 340). Thus, this changing flow of culture surrounds us and provides us with repertoires of reactions we use in our interactions. It is the product of our world-building activities, the world we as human beings are constantly rebuilding in social interactions (Berger 1990). "Culture is passed down from one generation to another, or it may be borrowed freely [...] Its elements interact with one another in accordance with principles of their own. Culture thus constitutes a supra-biological, or extra-somatic, class of events, a process *sui generis*" (White 1949: 16). How is it then possible that we perceive certain reactions as more appropriate than others, and that we sometimes choose one kind of reaction to a stimulus that is considered the same? It is because we organize certain situations and appropriate (and inappropriate) repertoires of reactions to these situations, so that we feel more secure.

As White convincingly argued, "there is no such thing as social interaction among human beings *as* human beings (i.e., as organisms behaving in terms of symbols)

that is not culturally determined." Culture is thus an objective reality for human beings whose relationship with the cultural representations of the world is not given; they "must ongoingly establish a relationship with it" (Berger 1990: 5). Institutions are here to dominate "the culture and so tend to control the type of behaviour of its members" (Kroeber 1963: 102). These organized behaviours are governed by symbols defined and controlled via official discourses. All human behaviour may be viewed as consisting of, or "[...]dependent upon, the use of symbols. Human behaviour is symbolic behaviour; *symbolic behavior is human behaviour*" (White 1949: 22; emphasis added). Human beings can never fully govern human interactions.

As Bryant made explicit in his article on nationality in Bohemia and Moravia in 1939–1946, attempts to understand ethnic categories are also attempts to understand who defines, and has power to decide on, ethnic membership and the content of that membership. The choice of ethnic identification is not purely a subjective matter; the answer to questions of how nationality is defined and ascribed, and of who wields the power to define and label individuals, has been "anything but obvious, yet they determined the fates of millions. Some individuals became members of the preferred national community, with all of the benefits that this entailed. The rest were expelled or murdered" (2002: 684). This article follows Bryant's methodological suggestion that, in order to better understand the possibilities for and obstacles to free ethnic identification or indifference, we should concentrate on what he calls *amphibians*:

> Most confusing for Nazi and Czechoslovak officials, and hence necessitating the most documentation, were so-called amphibians — a term Nazi anthropologists used to refer to people who could switch public nationalities or to people whose nationality was unclear. Amphibians are crucial to understanding how officials dealt with questions of nationality definition and ascription [...] Amphibians are also important for what they represent-the right and ability to choose a public nationality. In theory, nearly everyone living under the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) could be an amphibian. Education, language skills, and a whole array of local social pressures made, and kept, many people Czech or German (Bryant 2002: 684–685).

In this article, I will use the term *amphibian* to refer to all cases where an individual's ethnic identification or indifference is viewed or challenged as ambiguous. In these situations, people are (due to the widespread ideology of class and ethnicity) on one hand understood as essentially belonging to a distinct ethnic or even racial group. On the other hand, they can be ignorant of the fact of ascribed belonging or try to avoid the pre-defined category, as is the case for some migrant workers who wish to escape the trap of stigmatization, but their choices are not fully accepted, and are problematized.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A BOUNDARY-CROSSER

This article seeks to draw from my own *amphibian* experience as a Slovak citizen residing and working as a factory worker in the Czech Republic ten years

ago.[7] I have experienced "boundary-crossing" in many contexts, which enabled me to rethink on a daily basis the issues within class and ethnicity studies, and this article is an attempt to "interject personal experience" (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2) into the analysis of what I call *ethnic and class membership assignments* — the external structural pressures limiting my own choices of ethnic identification or indifference. I draw upon a method that is still considered somewhat experimental — autoethnography, a "necessarily trans-cultural communication, articulated in relation to self and a wider social field that includes an audience of 'others'." (Butz and Besio 2009). Autoethnography is used in interdisciplinary research on identity, and it is usually presented in "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9) and can serve as a method of using own experience in a reflexive manner to better understand larger sociocultural issues.

I was born at the end of the 1970s in the "communist" Czechoslovakia, which made me part of the "Husák's children"[8] generation. This generation experienced socialism only as children or adolescents, and therefore had lesser problems with the dramatic socio-economic transitional changes starting in 1990. Since change always brings opportunities for those who adapt, many of my schoolmates and friends achieved what is perceived as great career or material success in the post-socialist Slovakia (especially when compared to their parents' achievements and today's graduates, who have problems finding employment). Many did not and merged into the post-socialist working class. What is more striking is that we all live abroad, and all share the experience that "finding a decent job abroad" is considered a great success "back home." A "post-communist dream" promised rapid career development across the growing division of labour, early financial independence, and wide entertainment opportunities. More than anything, this paragraph exemplifies what I experienced to be legitimate post-socialist values for my generation—financial independence, an interesting career, and successful integration into a Western country from Slovakia.

My parents' understanding of the Czechoslovak category referred to a sort of idealized cosmopolitan vision of a country defined by its Protestant culture of education, imperial and Western legacy, distinct intelligentsia (from Karel Čapek, Franz Kafka through the New Wave, and Miloš Forman, Bohumil Hrabal, and Milan Kundera, to dissidents such as Václav Havel), and, above all, the capital city of Prague, a cultural, historical, and political crossroads. As for my socialization prior to adulthood, I must say that I was more familiar with the Czech-language culture than with the Slovak culture, as many of my peers. I learned to feel at home in the big cities of Prague, Brno or Ostrava, and I learned to disapprove of all identifications claiming to be distinctively Slovak.

I understood that I became "Slovak" after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, which was a very traumatic moment. Although only 15 at the time of the disintegration,

7 For autoethnographic and autobiographic approaches, see e.g. Ellis (2004), Reed-Danahay (ed., 1997), Okely (1992), and Okely and Callaway (eds., 1992).

8 A sociological term referring to a generation born during the "Baby Boom" period under the Czechoslovak president and leader of the Communist Party, Gustav Husák (1970s to mid-80s).

I remember the whole family crying in front of the TV on New Year's Eve in 1992, the last breath of the common state. We felt that the dissolution would cause our exclusion from the "better" world (broadly understood as "Western"). We wished to belong to the "more liberal" Czech Republic, not the nationalist, backward, narrow-minded Slovakia. For several years, during the quasi-authoritarian rule of Vladimír Mečiar,[9] claiming to feel Czechoslovak meant resistance, and gave us a sort of dissident feeling of a just cause.

Anybody and anything identifying and identified as Slovak led to distrust in the eyes of my family and friends. Ever since the breakup, I understood anything Slovak in pejorative terms and either feared or mocked those who were presented as nationalists to me. I shared this attitude not only with my family, but with many friends as well. I judged and tried to avoid anybody who wished to speak about Slovakia or Slovaks, and I remember that people around me reacted in a similar way.

After the 1998 end of the so-called Mečiarism period, when many people felt that politics directly affects and determines all other spheres of life, a political change came that largely meant a quicker transition to a neoliberal democracy. The Slovak-Czech dichotomization became less salient, as did the legacy of the common Czechoslovak state. There was an intelligible change in class and ethnic identification among many people. Identifying as a Slovak lost its political appeal and negative connotations, and the Czechoslovak identification ceased to be a legitimate way to protest, it meant nothing, so to say.[10] Almost overnight (or so it felt), the Czechoslovak identification lost its relevance and significance, as the Slovak identification (newly redefined as pro-Western) prevailed. My continuous situational identification as Czechoslovak became interpreted as a kind of romantic fantasy, a nostalgia for something that had never existed. Although there was a group of public intellectuals and television celebrities who did from time to time identify themselves as Czechoslovaks, their voice was too weak, and structured more as an intellectual gesture, an identification with a community of Czech artists and writers rather than with Slovak intellectuals.

Before my departure to the Czech Republic, I lived in Žilina, a small city in Slovakia. It was a period of rapid economic and political changes, as Slovakia entered NATO, the European Union, and the euro zone; the market became more liberalized; and foreign investment increased. All of these political and economic changes were associated with a massive introduction of the values of an alleged Western way of life. Throughout the public discourse, people were taught to be proud of Slovakia as a growing neoliberal economy, as a rapidly developing modern and prosperous country. This period felt as a sort of vacuum, as too many people could not participate in the benefits of modernization,[11] which opened room for a new kind of identity politics, represented by the left-wing politician Róbert Fico and his SMER political party.

9 For a description of Mečiar's rule in 1994–1998, see e.g. Haugton (2002).

10 See an interview with sociologist Vladimír Krivý at [http://volby.sme.sk/c/773157/rozdelenie-cesko-slovenska-10-rokov-po.html].

11 Sociologists typically called them 'losers' of the transition. [http://www.ineko.sk/files/Slovenska_verejnost_a_transformacia.pdf].

SMER has been winning mass support (with a 45.5% favourability rating in public opinion polls in October 2011) by introducing new ways of identification, legitimizing both communist nostalgia and moderate nationalism. SMER supported everyday manifestations of national pride as opposed to the neoliberal concept of Slovakia as a successful Western economy and the member of the European political community. The conflict had been widely discussed and made important by public intellectuals, artists, priests, and journalists. I felt alienated because I could not identify, yet I believed I wasn't allowed to be just ignorant. I decided to move to the Czech Republic, hoping to feel at home and more comfortable with my indifference toward Slovak identification, or — more simply — to avoid being forced into collectives, and to become an individual.

I found a factory job and started to look around for friends. This was how I actually *became Slovak* for the second time after the breakup of the Czechoslovak state. No matter what I said, no matter what I claimed to be or not to be, people communicated with me as a Slovak and interpreted my behaviour as Slovak behaviour. And, more importantly, no matter what I wanted, I *felt* Slovak among Czechs. Although Czech and Slovak are similar languages, my Slovak always served as a marker or distinctive feature of different belonging (Barth 1969). My usage of a different language was questioned on a daily basis. I must say I had never felt that *Slovak* before I moved to the Czech Republic, regardless of the situational, changing, and flexible nature of ethnic identification. However, one can say that it is not too difficult in certain situations for speakers of Slovak to mask their difference, regarding the history of common state, and to compare the reactions of people to my Czech and Slovak languages in similar situations. In spite of the similarity and legacy of a common state, being Slovak in the Czech Republic has been socially important and not always pleasant, especially in situations when the use of language is interpreted as a *class marker*. On the other hand, Czechoslovak identification has not been available for me; nobody understood my story about my Czech-loving upbringing, people in everyday communication in general stressed the sharp distinction and refused the idea of a Czechoslovak common identity that is, as the most frequent reaction goes, "a construct." Why can I not choose in many situations in the Czech Republic *not* to be Slovak? Why should I be stigmatized for an identity I had always refused? Why should I be considered an *amphibian*?

In her 1995 article, "The Vezo Are Not a Kind of People: Identity, Difference, and 'Ethnicity' among a Fishing People of Western Madagascar," Rita Astuti argued that types of alternative ethnicity identification exist. The Vezo are not people sharing any kind of essence (Vezo-ness) transmitted to them by their birth; they rather become and are becoming Vezo by performing activities considered to characterize the Vezo concept of identity. This article draws from this idea of alternative identification. The Vezo ethnic theory could help us better understand the peculiar nature of class and ethnic identification in today's world.

In line with Astuti (1995) and Burzová (2014), we define ethnic groups as definitions of what it means to be the member of an ethnic group by saying who the members are and how they should act. Ethnic categories are considered natural thanks to the widespread ideologies of banal ethnicity and nationalism (Billig 2005). But differ-

ent definitions are promoted by different actors in different situations. For example, before 1993, Slovak nationalists promoted a definition of the Slovak kind as those who support the breakup of the Czechoslovak Federation and oppose Czechs. The definition made many people (considered members of the Slovak nation by birth and blood) oppose Slovak identity, and they were indeed labelled as traitors and enemies in the official nationalist discourse. Thus "Slovak" earned many a negative connotation, referring to nationalism fighting against Europe, the West, Hungary and the Czech.

Following the Vezo ethnic theory, things and people designated as Slovak or Czech do not presuppose some sort of abstract entity or some essential meaning which people and things thus designated should possess.

It is this presumption of the existence of meanings as abstract entities or attributes that enables the use of the term *identity* in the analysis of class and ethnic identification. But class and ethnic membership assignments are reduced in many cases to a non-commonsensical and vague definitions. One should simply know "his place", the fact that he or she is a member of class and ethnic group and be proud of it. When I tried to identify as a Czech in the Czech Republic, or even as a Czechoslovak, I frequently found that people held and even internalized the very reduced definition of ethnic membership — "you were born Slovak, you are Slovak". In their view *amphibians* break the simple rule by refusing to be what they are — foreign workers, Slovaks, etc. — by not showing pride in the fact and by literally cheating on their identity by claiming affection for other cultures.

The official discourse of the Czech Republic would not allow any Czech-Slovak mixing. Slovaks and Czechs are defined as essential categories and they are therefore unchangeable. One cannot be Czech, or Czechoslovak, if one is born Slovak. The ethnic theory does not recognize such crossings of ethnic boundary. The definitions are even more rigid when the factor of class is present. As a factory worker, in all situation that my job was "visible", class and ethnicity merged to form a powerful social distance between me and those who could behave as and consider themselves Czechs. At the time of my experience in the Czech Republic, "Slovak" referred only to a subcategory of the wider "migrant workers".

Obviously, I had to face unpleasant problems when communicating with other migrant workers, especially those who themselves came from Slovakia. They could not understand my ignorance toward the language, feasts, food, music etc. "How is this possible, you do not even like your motherland?" my roommate asked, when I told her I wished I were born elsewhere. I was not invited to Slovak parties, almost as a traitor, as somebody who wished to higher his status, even his class position by pretending being something else. My *amphibian* ignorant behaviour was seen as a crime against cordially offered ethnic and class solidary bonds.

CONCLUSION

This article is based on my personal experience, on an autoethnography of a boundary-crosser, of a Slovak citizen wishing to remain ignorant of the definition of Slovak membership, and to how she should behave as a Slovak migrant worker. In a world of

banal ethnicity and class, possibilities for alternative and *amphibian* kinds of identification were discussed. Is it possible to identify and act as a Czech or Czechoslovak in the Czech Republic when you are a factory worker? Surely there are contexts when such identification may be possible, especially among cultural elites in cosmopolitan environments, where individuals can allude to a specific intellectual or cultural tradition or the legacy of an idealized and romanticised inter-war past. One can hear about nostalgia for the common Czechoslovak state, and many people manifest some affection toward the idea of kinship between Czechs and Slovaks. "After all, we are brothers", some say. But despite such use of kin symbolism, the definition of such alliance does not really inhere any belief in common "blood" or other essential bond. "We are alienated ex stepbrothers, at best", I would reply. Whether allowed or denied Czech or Czechoslovak identification to "Slovaks", in the end, people generally end up being ascribing Slovak or Czech (or another) label and sanction for the way others fulfil prevailing ethnic and class membership assignments.

The Czech and Slovak ethnic theory is different from the Vezo ethnotheory presented by Rita Astuti. Czech or Czechoslovak identity is not easily available to Slovak migrant workers because there is none officially shared representation of any kind of an essentialized bond. In a situation where everybody *believes* in the essential nature of the Slovak and Czech difference, *amphibian* identification sketched in my autoethnography is understood as a mere pose, an inauthentic construct, an attempt to cross class boundary, or an express lie.

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