

**HOUDA, PŘEMYSL. NORMALIZAČNÍ FESTIVAL: SOCIALISTICKÉ PARADOXY A POSTSOCIALISTICKÉ KOREKCE. PRAHA: UNIVERZITA KARLOVA, NAKLADATELSTVÍ KAROLINUM, 2019. 180. P. ISBN 978-80-246-4387-8.**



In 2011 the book *Konec Experimentu* (The End of the Experiment) was published by historian Michal Pullmann in which he treated the period of late 80's in Czechoslovakia in a new scope that time. He applied the approaches of Alexei Yurchak chiefly from the work *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* to explain the last years of Czechoslovakian state socialism. Pullman's book triggered off discussions about the nature of communist dictatorship and its legacy. Recent publication of historian and political scientist Přemysl Houda named *Normalizační festival: Socialistické paradoxy a postsocialistické korekce* (2019) has the potential to become another check-point of master-narrative battlefield between the interpretations of contemporary Czech history.

Houda's book is based on a long-term research of the phenomenon of folk music in last two decades of communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia. Former works of the author (*Šafrán*, 2008; *Intelektuální protest, nebo masová zábava?*, 2014) described various dimensions and aspects of the Czechoslovak folk music scene. It predominantly includes the history of the "stage" focusing on singers and musicians and their social and cultural impact. However, the newest one aims for the key role of the folk concert organizers not only as the people "behind the scene" of musical and cultural life but it defines this social milieu as an active power in everyday ideological practice that contributed to the erosion of socialist dictatorship in the late 80's.

Houda's well-readable study reminds rather the historical essay comprising short subchapters such a postmodern text-clips or teasers than traditional historical opus. It applies the fusion of historiographical, anthropological and philosophical inspiration (including also the popular culture production like novels or movies) to show the different scope on communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia than last decades. With the aid of few catchy metaphors, Houda criticizes the "old" post-communist narratives, which depicted the late-socialist social reality and the folk music scene in binary positions almost without any diversity. This review would like to point out two dimensions of Houda's provocative text.

Firstly, the most powerful parts of the work concern the role of ideological language in everyday life of selected personalities and their activities in organizing folk music concerts and festivals. On the basis of representative sample of the oral histories of "forgotten heroes" (p. 7) from various cities who were often members of local communist party administration and official youth organizations (especially SSM, abbreviation for *Svaz socialistické mládeže*, Czechoslovak analogy of Soviet *Komsomol*) Houda shows the cases of the inventive adoption of the rigid ideological language in social practice of late socialism. Applying Yurchak's concepts (e.g. *hypernormalization*) he demonstrates how some people accommodated the seemingly rigid phrases and ideological idioms to carry through the folk festivals and gigs. He argues that this group of people did not perceive the socialist reality in repressive point of view (or *limiting*, in the sense of Thomas Lindenberger conception) but was able to adapt the ideological discourse as a communication tool to force their own interests. Here comes Houda with the fitting comparison of one organizer to *The Pink Panther* who



repaints and shapes the socialist reality through his own colour (pp. 113–115). In other words, these parts of the book accurately express how the ideological *newspeak* was not only a manipulative and repressive instrument but could have also a creative dimension.

On the other side, Houda's book entered through its provocative tone into dangerous land of the historical memory. On the case of selected oral history interviews with the folk singer, Vladimír Merta Houda tries to expose how mainstream post-communist discourses about *ancient régime* can affect the perception of personal life in dictatorship. This part of the book led to the hot public discussion taken place in *Václav Havel Library* in Prague within the official launch of a book in January 2020. The debate showed some kind of ditch between the academic discourses and its viewing by contemporary witnesses.

Houda also attempts to deconstruct the concept of "grey zone" which was used for a long time to explain the uncertain position of some social strata in the dictatorship. Houda's approach could be taken problematic because of his reverse perspective. Pavel Barša aptly wrote that Houda's claim is a "retrospective illusion" (2020). Indeed, the book includes such a short introduction of the "grey zone" which could be better to elaborate on. For instance, there is an option to explain the disintegration of state socialism in Czechoslovakia via deeper *Begriffsgeschichte* of the "grey zone" as a historical term which arised from specific social milieu and had its own dynamics and impact.

In conclusion, Přemysl Houda opened more questions than answers via his book. It is characteristic that he holds the polemical dispute with himself in final chapter to show how every reconstruction of our past is so liquid and changeable including contemporary history (pp. 160–165). On the whole, *Normalizační festival*, marks out the course where to go in a research of state socialism. There is still a lot of space to explore how the socialist dictatorship broke on discursive level. It is worth surveying the dynamics and connections among the ideological practice, bureaucratic apparatus and its relation to society. Moreover, there is an opportunity to describe the links between the political, social and cultural development concerning many aspects of everyday life in a scope of comparative history of communist regimes in East-Central Europe. The phenomenon of folk music is a good topic proved also by the international studies like the *Popular Music in Eastern Europe: Breaking the Cold War Paradigm* (Mazierska, 2016).

**Martin Mejzr**