

Jan Géryk

M.A. Dissertation Evaluation

The American Left and Communist Czechoslovakia, 1956-1968

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Jan Géryk has written his M.A. dissertation on a very interesting topic, namely the influence of American leftist thought on the reform process in Czechoslovakia between 1956 and 1968. It was a pleasure to supervise Jan's work and he was most diligent and kept deadlines and appointments. The work itself is nicely written and well referenced. There is an Introduction, four main chapters, and a Conclusion. In the ensuing paragraphs, I shall provide my comments on each section of Jan's work.

In the Introduction, Jan spells out his motivation for choosing the topic and for choosing the post-Stalinist period, which dates back to Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin's crimes in 1956. Jan sees the definition of post-Stalinism in intellectual terms and considers post-Stalinism to represent a global phenomenon. The definitions of terms are provided straight away and Jan's critique of the literature is excellent. The Introduction does precisely what it ought to do and I am very impressed.

Chapter 1 discusses the impact of the events of 1956 on leftist ideology. The events considered are the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union where Khrushchev delivered his remarks on Stalinism, as well as the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The Soviet crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 led many Western intellectuals to abandon the Communist Party. A prime example of this is the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre. Jan discusses the changes on both the Stalinist and anti-Stalinist Left and how a space was created

for the so-called New Left, which could find solace not in Western capitalism or Soviet Communism, but rather in Third World developments. The New Left differentiated itself by focusing on specific issues and problems and saw race and gender as a way to search for the identity of the self. I find this chapter most fascinating and to the point.

An analysis of the Czechoslovak and American Left in the 1960s forms the content of Chapter 2. Jan's analysis of the ideas of American New Left guru, C. Wright Mills, is impressive. In the Czechoslovak case, Jan relies on interviews published in Antonín J. Liehm's *The Politics of Culture*. By the way, Liehm's work in the original Czech bears the title *Generace* (Generation or Generations). And that's what the 1960s were about. Most noticeably in the United States, the student youth rose up and demanded answers to original questions and the answers were generally not forthcoming. In Czechoslovakia, the target of progressive reformers (who indeed were on the Left) was the impersonal, ineffective overarching bureaucratic system. Names worthy of mention are Karel Kosík, Milan Průcha, and Ivan Sviták. One also should not forget, as Jan notes, that these thinkers also influenced the non-Marxist, Václav Havel. In this chapter, Jan points out well the notable differences of the Czechoslovak and American Left, which were based on different historical issues as well as different actual problems that needed to be addressed. This is both informative and intellectually robust.

In Chapter 3, Jan discusses the exchange of ideas across the Iron Curtain. The visits of notable visitors like W.E.B. DuBois, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pete Seeger, and Allen Ginsberg and their reception by Czechoslovak counterparts, as well as Americans living in Czechoslovakia are scrutinized in detail. An important

distinction pointed out by Jan in his analysis is that whereas in the States, leftists tended to blend Marxism and New Leftism, their colleagues in Czechoslovakia were more inclined to mix Marxism with existentialism. Again, different historical experiences and a different context provided the reasons for this. This chapter provides excellent information and analysis and naturally leads to a discussion about the Prague Spring, which is the subject of Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 analyzes American reactions to the Prague Spring of 1968. Jan rightly states that the reform process in Czechoslovakia began in earnest in the early 1960s. The Prague-based American economist, George S. Wheeler, believed that, in order for a regime like the Communist one in Prague to be discredited, a visible failure needed to occur. The shortcomings of the central economic plan between 1962 and 1963 were indeed an example of such a shortcoming and the path to economic de-Stalinization was opened. The architect of 1960s economic reforms in Czechoslovakia was Ota Šik, who argued that economic central planning was unsustainable. A lively debate ensued in American Marxist circles about the reforms and there is no space here to get into the details. However, Šik's ideas were analyzed especially in the field of political economy and Jan logically delves into the political aspects of the Prague Spring. He provides a bird's-eye view of support and criticism in American leftist circles. Likewise, American reactions to the Soviet invasion are reproduced and analyzed. This chapter clearly demonstrates the intellectual interest aroused by the Prague Spring and its aftermath.

In the Conclusion, Jan recapitulates his main arguments and clearly delineates between ideological and bureaucratic thinking on one hand and the anti-ideological 1960s atmosphere on the other. It is wonderful that Jan emphasizes

the importance of the cultural and philosophical aspects, which really were the heart and soul of the Prague Spring.

Jan Géryk has produced a treatise that far exceeds the requirements for a successful M.A. dissertation. His broad powers of analysis have resulted in a highly original work that he ought to consider publishing. I recommend an **excellent** classification.

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