

Thesis Review

Author: Caroline Bilsky

Title: Why Culture Houses Persist: Transitioning a Czech Icon

Opponent: Ondřej Klípa

In her thesis Caroline Bilsky presented a text of a high quality which could compete at the level of international academic journals. She proved that she knows why it is important to describe the methodology of the research and why the academic theories are useful. In my opinion, it distinguishes Caroline's text from many other students' works in which both methodology and theories are often regarded as a "necessary evil".

I also appreciate her interdisciplinary approach. I believe that it is very enriching to employ social anthropology in the field of area studies. In my opinion, however, this kind of interdisciplinary approach should have been consulted in a broader circle of institute's faculty before getting down to the research. The problem, that I personally felt, was the capacity of a reviewer(s) to adequately assess qualities of the text in so different discipline.

I have only a few critical remarks or, more precisely, recommendations. Caroline suggests that the transition of the Czech village environment is rather neglected in the Czech sociology. I think she should have been familiar with works of, for instance, Josef Kandert (*Jihomoravský venkov po socializmu*), Haudis Haukanes (*Velká dramata – obyčejné životy. Postkomunistické zkušenosti českého venkova*), Jiří Kabele (*Přerodové procesy ve Filipově a v české společnosti*) or, say, Bohuslav Blažek (*Venkovy: Anamnéza, Diagnóza, Terapie*) who studied the post-Communist transformation of Czech villages.

I found very interesting how Caroline contextualized her research topic with the Sokol movement and the role of "Sokolovna" as a gathering place. However, taking into account broader aspects of Czech culture would have helped to understand better why the Czech Culture Houses survived so easily. What about Czech attitude towards religion and the missing role of church as a place where the whole community meet at least once a week? And what about Czech pubs? The traditional "hospoda", the place where people liked to drink, eat, and have cultural events, was nationalized as a private business after 1948 but it smoothly continued in the same role under the state ownership, very often in Cultural Houses. This universal role of hospoda has no roots in Poland or former Soviet countries, for example.

Having said that, I don't think that the place of Cultural Houses in the Czech culture should be as highlighted as Caroline did in the final part of her text. Similar "iconic" role could be attributed, in my opinion, also to other phenomenal buildings such as "chata" – a place where people escaped from their "official" lives. Although it is about the individual dimension, contrary to the collective dimension of Culture Houses, there are many common elements. It has a clear pre-Communist history, it expanded and acquired a specific role under Communism and eventually it survived until nowadays with slightly changed meanings attributed to it. Unlike the Culture Houses case, Caroline could have used already quite a robust literature on that matter (see e.g. Bičík, Ivan a kol.: *Druhé bydlení v Česku*. Praha: Katedra sociální geografie a regionálního rozvoje UK, 2001).

Finally, one methodological remark comes to mind. Although Caroline described her methodology and process tracing very well, she might have concerned more "positioning" herself as a researcher. As a "foreigner" from "the West", studying some "weird" stuff (remember that still very popular Czech president expressed his utmost disgust precisely at cultural anthropology) and sending quite

complicated and demanding questioner in both English and Czech, attracts attention of only limited sample of Culture House employees. Or the other way round, it might have discouraged quite significant group of the employees who could have provided Caroline with completely different opinions on the Communist regime and the past of Cultural Houses. Of course, it is not at all Caroline's fault that these people did not respond but her specific position should have been more emphasized. Similarly, I am aware of the fact that Caroline did not intend to draw any far-reaching generalizations from her qualitative research. However, the omitted sample of the employees deserves some comments at least in the discussion.

All in all, I very much appreciate that Caroline with her solid research contributed to this interesting and yet insufficiently (but increasingly – especially with regard to architecture) studied topic.

Questions: What would you suggest for your (or anyone's else) further research on Cultural Houses? How should the further research expand (regionally, thematically)? Why is it important to study that topic?

I recommend the thesis for the oral defense.

My grade suggestion: výborně (excellent, A)