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**BETWEEN RESENTMENT AND FORGIVENESS:
PUBLIC HISTORIES IN THE CZECH AND SOUTH
AFRICAN TRANSITIONS**

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Abstract

Departing from the recent scholarship that acknowledges fundamental similarities in the post-colonial and the post-socialist experiences, the article argues that comparisons across these two contexts and paradigms prove themselves to be a useful tool for analysis of specific problems of transitioning societies. This claim is demonstrated by examination of the making of public history of the recent past in the Czech Republic and South Africa. Two authoritative aspects of public history are considered: the state-sanctioned commemoration and historiography. Whereas the South African state has sought by the means of transitional justice to reconcile the former victims and victimizers in a shared quest for the truth, the Czech state prioritizes legislative and judiciary assignment of retroactive blame. The South African historiography is closely tied to collective memory and prefers the approach of social history. The Czech historiography of the recent past is dominated by the totalitarian paradigm and prioritizes archival work. In both cases, the political and the historiographical projects seem to overlap in crucial points. It is suggested that the articulation of

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public history as either resentment or forgiveness may have been ultimately predetermined by the forms of resistance to the oppressive regimes.

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The early 1990s were a period that witnessed a number of nations undergoing a political transition to democratic rule. Alongside the former state-socialist countries, such as Czechoslovakia, or the Czech Republic, respectively, there was also the South Africa that had just shed off the apartheid regime, which was one of the last vestiges of colonialism. Although they had different historical trajectories, this article will argue that in the process of transition they have encountered structurally identical problem of a rupture in national narrative. The abrupt change had turned collective and personal memories into a political battleground where all citizens, even those formerly excluded from public discourse, could suddenly attempt to negotiate how the immediate past should be remembered. On the grounds of the assumption that post-colonialism and post-socialism are phenomena that can be considered together, a juxtaposition of the Czech and the South African experience should help to better understand the ways in which the remembrance has been taking place. Two authoritative stakeholders in the public memory and their views will be presented – the state and the discipline of historiography. As it gradually turns out, their commemorative projects are isomorphic within each country, but they are driven by notions of justice that are country-specific and range from resentment to forgiveness.

Post-socialism/colonialism

The post-apartheid South Africa and the post-socialist Czech Republic – choosing the countries with so diverse history, location, population, politics, or economy for a common consideration may seem at best as a haphazard and unpromising endeavor. Could we honestly expect the results of such a comparison to be anything else but a reaffirmation of fundamental differences between the two nations, the very differences that must be assumed in any reasonable departing hypothesis? The goal of this paper is merely to demonstrate the usefulness of cross-areas and cross-regime comparisons rather than to offer an exhaustive account of the respective countries' public histories. In anticipating the findings presented in this article, it should be noted that they shall come as no surprise; transitions to democracy from apartheid and from state-socialism indeed appear to be divergent experiences. If anything, the element of surprise rests in the observation that the differences in how the states and their historians treat the undemocratic past unveil in an almost binary form. Yet regardless of what form the differences take, the underlying assumption of this article is a conviction that they delimit the respective experiences and in so doing, they define them from the outside. Such negative determination may productively challenge the taken-for-granted aspects of positive and internally constructed definition of the respective societies.

Albeit the rapprochement of the post-socialist and post-colonial paradigms has recently begun to gain in currency, it is still not a common-place theoretical position. It still needs to assert itself against the vehemence with which some scholars of the post-socialist countries defend the singularity of their research object. When Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl proposed, in what became a starting point to an important debate on the (im)possibility of comparative approaches in transitology, to study the democratization in Central and Eastern Europe through the lenses of analogous processes in Southern Europe and Latin

America,¹ the area studies proponent, Valery Bunce, questioned the very premise of comparability between the two examples and resolutely retorted that “the differences between postcommunism and the transition in the south are *far* more substantial than Schmitter and Karl’s discussion seems to imply”.² Nonetheless, even Bunce, a defender of post-socialist particularity, admits that there it could be reasonable to engage in comparisons of democratization in Eastern and Southern Europe’s, because they “alert us to fundamental problems in how transitologists have understood and analyzed transitions from authoritarian rule”.³

The original and quite broadly conceived call for bringing the post-colonial paradigm to post-socialist space was made by David Chioni Moore in his now well-known article “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique”. As it is evident from the title, the primacy is attributed to the “postcolonial critique” that should make the former Second World, and the entire globe as a matter of fact, its new territory. The premise of this perspective is explicated by Moore as follows:

It is no doubt true that there is, on this planet, not a single square meter of inhabited land that has not been, at one time or another, colonized and then postcolonial. The result of all this movement, much of which has been arguably criminal, is that many cultural situations, past and present, can be said to bear the postcolonial stamp, often in ways only partly corresponding to current notions.⁴

¹ Philippe C. SCHMITTER – Terry Lynn KARL, “The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?”. *Slavic Review*, vol. 53, 1994, no. 1, p. 173–185.

² Valerie BUNCE, “Should Transitologists Be Grounded?”. *Slavic Review*, vol. 54, 1995, no. 1, p. 119.

³ BUNCE, “Should Transitologists Be Grounded?”, p. 127.

⁴ David Chioni MOORE, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique.” *PMLA*, vol. 116, 2001, no. 1, p. 112.

Moore attempts to extend the explanatory reach of post-colonial theory to the point where post-socialism ultimately becomes no more than a variant of post-colonialism.⁵ There is, nonetheless, a space in his argument for a post-socialist specificity. Alongside the traditional modes of analyzing post-colonialism, Moore coins the term of “reverse colonialism” that would help to account for the particular dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized in Eastern Europe:

The standard Western story about colonization is that it is always accompanied by orientalization, in which the colonized are seen as passive, ahistorical, feminine, or barbaric. However, in Russian – Central European colonization this relation is reversed, because for several centuries at least Russia has, again, been saddled with the fear or at times belief that it was culturally inferior to the West. *Mittel*-European capitals such as Budapest, Berlin, and Prague were therefore seen in Russia, at least by some, as prizes rather than as burdens needing civilizing from their occupiers. In return, the Central Europeans often saw the colonizing Russo-Soviets as Asiatics.⁶

With the conceptual proviso of “reverse colonization”, it should be clear that the post-colonial critique cannot be simply superimposed on the post-socialist space without any adjustments. And while an inspiration from the post-colonial paradigm can help us to move beyond the predominant casuistic approaches to transitions, the multi-layered experience of state-socialism needs to be attended to. Apart from the (in some respects) reversed dynamics between the centre and the periphery in Central and Eastern Europe, at least two other conditions alter substantially the colonial dynamics of state-socialism. Firstly, one

⁵ Moore is very explicit on this point: “As for universalizing the postcolonial condition, I close by supporting such a move.” *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

should not neglect the fact that the Soviet imperialism encompassed nations that had, generally, accomplished their formative period and thus nationalistic politics plays out somewhat differently in the post-socialist countries than it does in the post-colonial ones, where nation-formation takes primacy over democratization. Secondly, the complicity of indigenous populations of Eastern European countries with the Soviet imperial project is crucial to comprehension of the post-socialist situation.

Caution is necessary. Uncritical acceptance of post-colonial paradigm by post-socialist scholars may result in simplification, as it appears when one considers the implication of statements such as this one from the collection of essays that, commendably, attempt to follow Moore's lead: "There are indeed excellent reasons why the Baltic countries should be and always should have been seen as the victims of colonization."⁷ While the welcome that Moore's arguments have received in the scholarship on Baltic republics is understandable, as these countries were forcefully incorporated into the Soviet Union itself, it also seems to advance its own agenda of using the post-colonial theory as a pretext for nationalistic ideology⁸ and in an attempt to vilify Russians. The strong anti-Soviet backlash should be an object of research in post-socialism, not its guiding principle. The relationship between colonizer and colonized does not simply lend itself to a translation into the relationship between victimizer

⁷ Kārlis RAČEVSKIS, "Toward a Postcolonial Perspective on the Baltic States." In: KELERTAS, V. (ed.), *Baltic Postcolonialism*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi 2006, p. 167.

⁸ As Todorov aptly remarks, a status of victim may actually be very desirable in societies devoted to commemoration: "To have been victim gives you the right to complain, to protest, and to make demands. [...] It is more advantageous to stay in the role of a victim than to obtain reparation for the suffered offence. [...] Instead of momentary satisfaction, one keeps a permanent privilege, and the attention, and thus the recognition, from others is assured." Tzvetan TODOROV, *Les abus de la mémoire*. Paris: Arléa, 1995. Todorov's observation should be always kept in mind when reflecting on the struggles over public history in post-socialist states.

and victim and the complexity of post-socialism owes much precisely to the difficulty of drawing clear lines between and within both of these binary oppositions.

Due to its unpredictable pitfalls, an essential affinity “between the posts” should be considered, at least tentatively, in terms of analogy rather than identity. The two “posts” may not share enough similarities of the “common denominator” order that would permit straightforward collection of statistical aggregate data; the comparison remains, above all, an epistemological enterprise, a catalyst in the shift of paradigms. After all, the further elaborations on the Moore’s initial program were rather cautious and strived to establish a more balanced relationship between post-colonialism and post-socialism.⁹ A prospect of a unifying post-“authoritarian” theory shall only be bequeathed to future conceptual efforts that need to rest on a fundamentally intensified interdisciplinary

⁹ For example, Monica Popescu sees the relationship as reciprocal: “The advantages of imagining Eastern Europe and the former colonial world within the same intellectual paradigm are reciprocal. Post-colonial discourse lends its Eastern European counterpart critical tools for discussing relations of power between center (Moscow) and periphery, as well as issues of migration, dislocation, hybridized communities, and hegemonic discourses. Post-communism offers the Marxism indebted wings of post-colonialism the necessary check of reality: the crumbling of the systems based on Marxist utopia and the failure of their revolutionary projects cannot be ignored.” Monica POPESCU, “Translations: Lenin’s Statues, Post-communism and Post-apartheid.” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 16, 2003, no. 2, p. 117–118. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (in “Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography After the Cold War.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 51, 2009, no. 1, p. 6–34), although they acknowledge the head start that post-colonialism has in reflection on epistemological questions, suggest that “thinking between the posts” entails understanding of how the Cold War and the state-sanctioned racisms acted upon both the colonial and the state-socialist domains. For a good overview of the debates, see the article by Alison Stenning and Kathrin Hörschelmann. (“History, Geography and Difference in the Post-socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism”. *Antipode*, vol. 2008, no. 40, p. 312–335), who also “wish to shift the focus away from these direct uses of post-colonial theory towards a broader consideration.” *Ibid.*, p. 325.

exchange of knowledge. Solely a development along these lines can either satisfactorily subdue doubts about the feasibility of such a project, or reveal its ultimate undesirability as a far-fetched abstraction with little explanatory power. In the remainder of the article, the hypothetical comparability of post-colonialism and post-socialism will be put to a conceptual litmus test.

Analogical pasts

A nexus of analogy between the Czech Republic and South Africa that offers itself readily to an analysis is their troubled past, or more precisely, the ways in which the two countries objectify it. As much as the respective pasts differ in many important respects, the challenges with which they confront contemporary collective memory exhibit similar configurations. The past needs to be rearticulated in the national narratives and it must be done under the conditions of democratization. The emphasis on the latter process sets off South Africa from many other post-colonial countries and approximates it to the post-socialist one. The struggle against apartheid was primarily for democracy and not for independence. As a settler colony, South Africa also could not dispense with the presence of the colonizers and thus has to negotiate a place for them in the national community. Last but not least, post-socialism and the post-apartheid variant of post-colonialism were born simultaneously out of the same global geopolitical conjuncture. While South Africa remains an Other in the view of the Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia), it is also the Other that is “strangely familiar”. As Annie Coombes proclaims:

South Africa encapsulates a number of dilemmas that have faced both those nation-states recovering from long periods of colonization and those that have recently emerged from a long period of

totalitarian rule – the situation in both Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of the Communist regimes.¹⁰

For these reasons, South Africa seems to be the perfect counter-part of the Czech Republic for exploring the possibilities of communication between the post-colonial and the post-socialist experience. Therefore, we shall attempt to sketch out a couple of memorial strategies deployed in the framing of post-socialist and post-apartheid public histories. The focus will be on 1. the identification of the crucial steps that the state apparatuses have taken to account for the immediate past; 2. the identification of the main trends in national historiographies of the immediate past. The states' treatment of the past figures as a prominent symbolic action in the general public discourse. The historians' representations of the past are similarly powerful in the specific case of public memory. With the emergence of historical memory, the memory, as Paul Ricoeur puts it,¹¹ "acculturated" to the hegemony of history, people have become accustomed to accept the historian's explanation of past events as truthful (true to the memory) despite its external character.

There is no doubt that such a circumscribed focus cannot provide a sufficient account of the public objectifications of past. Above all, the immense field of media discourse would need to be examined in order to render a more detailed description of public history. In addition, memorial landscape and artistic expressions should be included to make the analysis complete. Nonetheless, the relatively more restricted fields of historical science and commemorative politics are conveniently compact wholes and their brief scrutiny can thus make identification of main trends an easier enterprise. Furthermore, the universalizing democratic ideology and sci-

¹⁰ Annie E. COOMBES, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press 2003, p. 6.

¹¹ Ric 394

entific epistemology as a shared discursive context assure that the various notions are more liable to mutual juxtaposition.

Memories of the states

The apartheid past weighs heavily on the reimagined South African nation; but what is more peculiar and deserves a notice is the fact that the current state expresses this overtly in its highest law. The preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa begins with the following words: “We, the people of South Africa, recognize the injustices of our past.”¹² Among its purposes, the Constitution lists the hope to “heal the divisions of the past” and, in the remainder of its text, it contains numerous references to “past racial discrimination”. Although these references can – and should – be related to the oppressive past far beyond the immediate past, i. e. to the entire colonial history, the primacy of the apartheid as the foremost target of these provisions is hardly deniable. The new South African state thus assigns itself a duty to remember its racist predecessor.

Besides this duty to memory, a patrimonial perspective on memory also appears at a few place in the South African constitution, which recognizes national “heritage” and “traditional” structures. This is an aspect that the South African constitution shares with the Czech one. The latter acknowledges patrimony as well when it proclaims the

citizens of the Czech Republic in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, at this time of the reconstitution of an independent Czech State, [to be] true to all the sound traditions of the ancient statehood of the Lands of the Crown of Bohemia as well as of Czechoslovak statehood, [...] resolute to protect and develop their natural, cultural, material and spiritual heritage.¹³

¹² *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Act no. 108 of 1996.

¹³ *Constitution of the Czech Republic*. Act no. 1/1993 Coll.

Yet this sole allusion to past appears to disregard its immediate, authoritarian part. Only the word – “reconstitution” – suggests existence of a troubled past. However, this past is unnamed and unspecified (there are no remarks akin to the references to “racial discrimination” that are found in the South African constitution). As far as the explicit text of the constitution is considered, state-socialism never existed, unless one would foolishly suppose it to be a part of the “heritage” that the lawmakers deemed as important to “protect and develop”.

The will to confront its unpleasant memories that makes the South African constitution stand out not only when compared to the Czech one, but also against the background of the entire tradition of constitutionalism. In the words of Eduard Fagan:

With all constitutions traces of the history of their making, of the context in which they came into being, are implicit in their choice of, and way of formulating, constitutional provisions. The South African constitution, however, in a number of provisions seeks expressly to capture the history and the context. It regulates the future conduct of government, of course, but it also contains a number of unusual provisions which are best explained as deliberate attempts constantly to remind the interpreter of the constitution of the unequal society that forms the backdrop to the text.¹⁴

The discrepancy between the two constitutions in terms of their relationship to the immediate past is evident. On the one hand, we see a duty to remember elevated to a fundamental law; on the other hand, we notice an act of deliberate omission. Nonetheless, the difference could easily be purely accidental. As we shall see below, the Czech Republic has

¹⁴ Eduard FAGAN, “The Constitutional Entrenchment of Memory.” In: COE-TZEE, C. – NUTTALL, S. (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 250.

its own take on enacting the duty to remember, albeit not as a part the re-constitution of statehood. Before speculating about the implications of these differences for the formation of official memory, we should continue to investigate other and presumably more important actions that the two states have taken in face of the past from which they had emerged.

To identify the key aspects of the official memories, we need to give heed to the specific legislation and institutions that the states have introduced to deal specifically with the past under discussion. These special laws and institutions fall under the umbrella of the methods of transitional justice.¹⁵ These may assume, for example, the following forms, as Barbara Misztal remarks about Central and Eastern Europe:

Among policies which have been implemented in Eastern European countries to deal with their communist past, the most common are: policies of lustration (screening the past of candidates for important positions with the aim of eliminating them from important public office), decommunization (excluding former Communist Party officials from high public positions), restitution of property, recompensation and rehabilitation of victims.¹⁶

Some of these mechanisms of transitional justice were employed in South Africa as well. For example, the restitution of property and land to people who were dispossessed by the undemocratic regimes, typically for political reasons, is a legal instrument that can be found in both the cases that we follow here. The experiences with restitutions are symmetrical. What Sean Field notes about the process of land restitutions in South Africa applies perfectly to the Czech Republic as well: "The land restitution cases are handled administratively and legally, and [...] there is no public space where land claimants can tell their stories. Many have suggested

¹⁵ See Ruti G. TEITEL, *Transitional Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

¹⁶ Barbara A. MISZTAL, *Theories of Social Remembering*. Maidenhead – Philadelphia: McGraw-Hill International 2003, p. 151.

that just such a public process is necessary.”¹⁷ Although restitutions in the Czech Republic stirred from time to time an opinionated debate in the media, this has not affected their status as an administrative and judicial problem that requires no special attention of the state other than legislation of its principles. Measures such as restitutions, while being an important symbolic move by the state in the renunciation of past injustices, fall short of the complete dimension of justice that requires, in the words of Judith Skhlar, to “take the victim’s view into full account and give her voice its full weight”.¹⁸

South African state did, however, establish a public arena for expression of political grievances related to the past. A peculiar design to have stories of both the victims and the victimizers told marks the South African case off from many others, which we treat as principally comparable here. This peculiarity consisted of the foundation of the well-known Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995, a year after the definite demise of the apartheid system. Its public character was an important innovation in this type of a transitional justice institution: “One significant aspect of the South African example [...] is that out of the nineteen instances of international truth commissions, the South African TRC was the first to be held as a form of public hearing.”¹⁹

Much of the scholarly literature on the South African public memory and history is devoted to the discussion of the TRC, which also testifies to

¹⁷ Sean FIELD, “Imagining Communities: Memory, Loss, and Resilience in Post-Apartheid Cape Town.” In: HAMILTON, P. – SHOPES, L., *Oral History and Public Memories*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2008, p. 117.

¹⁸ Judith N. SHKLAR, *The Faces of Injustice*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1990, p. 126.

¹⁹ COOMBES, *History After Apartheid*, p. 244. The public nature of the TRC’s hearings also had an expectable corollary, as Coombes adds: “Another crucial dimension is that the TRC was turned into a media spectacle. The lies, the deceptions, the brutality, the tears, the weaknesses, and the strengths were transformed into theatre via the representations, which were broadcast regularly on SABC and national radio and reported in the national press.” *Ibid.*

the centrality of the institution in the “work of mourning” undertaken by the nation. Deborah Posel sums up the mission of the TRC as a quest for a “truthful” historical narrative around which a nation could rally:

Truth commissions have set out to write and present public histories in ways that position the pursuit of truth center stage in a drama of efforts to broker peace and transcend past histories of brutal violence and painful division. Truth commissions, then, are particular techniques of “nation building” that are deployed largely outside the West [sic!]²⁰

TRC also worked symbolically as a model for forgiveness. Its Amnesty Committee was granted a power to deliver amnesty to those who engaged in criminal behavior during the apartheid era on the proviso that a political motivation could be ascertained and full disclosure of the acts presented. Essentially, in so doing, the state gave a priority to reconciliation with the past and among its divided populace over its interest to enforce everyday legality. Although normally such a departure from the certainty of legal order could be expected to weaken the trust in the state apparatus, but the exceptional character of the institution combined with the urgent need to address past grievances may in fact strengthen the trust as the apparatus aligns itself more closely with the national community.

One would look in vain for a similar notion of transitional justice in the Czech Republic. The representative of the Czech state would probably concur with the hope of the South African lawmakers who

deemed [it] necessary to establish the truth in relation to past events as well as the motives for and circumstances in which gross

²⁰ Deborah POSEL, “History as Confession: The Case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” *Public Culture*, vol. 2008, no. 20, p. 119.

violations of human rights have occurred, and to make the findings known in order to prevent a repetition of such acts in future.²¹

However, the particular ways that each state uses to translate its proclamations into concrete institutions and practices differ so significantly that they, in fact, seem to follow quite disparate agendas. While the South African state seems to be resolute in its commitment not to forget, it also went out of its way to forgive. On the contrary, “to forget but not to forgive was the more common strategy in Central and East European countries leaving Communism behind.”²²

Czechs have also witnessed a motion of transitional justice that, however, may be more aptly called a retroactive justice. That what appears to be perhaps a merely inconsequential terminological nuance, carries with it a conceptual difference sufficient to prevent a conflation of these two notions, which is otherwise a frequent occurrence. The basis for this retroactive justice was laid down primarily by two laws. The Act of 13 November 1991 about the period of the lack of freedom²³ and the Act of 9 July 1993 about the unlawful character of the communist regime and about the opposition to it²⁴ defined the immediate past as a legally precarious period that had not allowed for a proper functioning of prosecution and courts.

There are two important differences that make this strategy incompatible with the South African solution. Firstly, whereas the TRC made it possible for perpetrators of past wrongdoings to repent of their actions and avoid or cancel a punishment, the Czech legislation declared that the negative prescription on politically motivated offences committed in the past cannot count in the duration of the state-socialist regime, implying that there would be more punishment, not less. Secondly, the prosecution

²¹ *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*. Act. no. 34 of 1995.

²² Iwona IRWIN-ZARECKA, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 1994, p. 127.

²³ Act no. 480/1991 Coll.

²⁴ Act no. 198/1993 Coll.

of such formerly unpunished offences should be carried out in standard courts. Thus, no special, transitional, status would be conferred upon those crimes. Restoration of the authority of everyday legality thus achieves primacy. In this manner, the state repudiates personal testimony as a necessary precondition in the pursuit of “truth” about the past. In this vision, the apparatus of the state is fully credited with the capability of unveiling the said “truth”. In effect, two distinct modes of remembering begin to take shape. One builds up from the bottom, while the other one works from the top down. As Wojciech Sadurski skillfully explicates, in a passage that is in opportune concurrence with this paper’s approach:

the difference between these truth commissions and the Czech declaration is that the former – such as the Commission on Historical Clarification in Guatemala or Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa – typically work their way from detailed, single-case accounts to generalised characterisations of the regime. [...] But the Czech statutory declaration [about the unlawful character of the communist regime] is nothing but interpretation, and – at best – a “generalised account”. [...] As such, it is not the basis for a consensus-seeking establishment of the facts about the past, but rather a dissensus-provoking state orthodoxy about the ideological lenses through which the past should be viewed.²⁵

²⁵ Wojciech SADURSKI, *Rights Before Courts*. Dordrecht: Springer 2005, p. 231. Sarduski actually likens the truth commission model to historian’s work, to “the way in which an individual historian constructs a synthetic account on the basis of cases, facts and events” (*ibid.*); but as we shall see below, the work of a historian does not present a universally applicable model entirely free of social determination.

Histories of the historians

It may come across as inappropriate to open a summary overview of the post-socialist and post-apartheid historiographies with a reference to yet another statutory instrument, but the act of the Czech parliament on the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and the Security Services Archive²⁶ represents a major effort of the state to promote research specialized on the history of the state-socialist regime. By virtue of its status as an “institute”, the recently found organization enjoys academic status and employs qualified historians. What is worrisome is the prescription of its research focus, which the law’s preamble narrows to “[investigation and recall of] the consequences of the activity of criminal organizations based on the Communist and Nazi ideologies advocating suppression of human rights and rejecting the principles of a democratic state in the years 1938–1945 and 1948–1989”.²⁷ It is here, not in the constitution, that the Czech Republic legislates duty to remember and, by the same token, passes it, albeit in an ambiguous manner, onto historians.

This “forensic” flavor, which in effect sees the past generations through a prism of victims and victimizers, was the main reason for a controversy that surrounded the passing of the act in 2007. Criticism came predictably from the M.P.s of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, a successor to the formerly ruling Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, but also from other leftwing parties and from an important segment of the community of historians. A peculiar forerunner of this institute is the Office for the Documentation and the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism, an organization that is actually a part of the Police of the Czech Republic, although it has, since 1995, carried out a lot of historiographical and archival type of work.

²⁶ Act no. 181/2007 Coll.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

An obsession with archives is a salient feature of the Czech post-socialist historiography of the immediate past. This urge to construct, but above all, to declassify and make public the archives of the previous regime is something else than the “imperative of our epoche [which] is not only to keep everything, to preserve every indicator of memory – even when we are not sure which memory is being indicated – but also to produce archives.”²⁸ These are the words of Pierre Nora from his famous article on the realms of memory that attempted to account for the changes in the social forms of remembering in modern societies, divested of their living memory. In this sense, the “imperative” to archive is a universalizing process. Yet as such it is also defined by “indiscriminate production of archives”²⁹ and that characteristic is only partly responsible for the very deliberate, targeted and discriminatory efforts to archive the traces of state-socialism. The latter are distinct by the purpose of revealing the identities of individuals who were either members of secret service police or who collaborated with them. Another detective trend in historiography would examine the previously unknown documents of political nature in order to discover the backstage maneuvers of communist politicians.

This fringe history that proliferates in intimate connection with the state’s objectives represents, of course, only a fragment in the overall historiographical discipline. Yet, in the debates on the immediate past, it is a fragment of considerable importance. The standard historiography offers little counterweight to the former tendency and could hardly claim a similar public significance. The output of the research is extensive enough in a number of publications, but the research’s scope is very narrow regarding the perspectives employed. Resembling the history of “great men”, the history of the previous regime becomes a stage where the impersonal “Party” is the main actor. In a curious consequence, the

²⁸ Pierre NORA, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *Representations*, vol. 1989, no. 26, p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

state-socialist and the post-socialist historians seem to share a similar vision of history, where the Communist Party is the true leader of the masses, only now the normative statements differ. Young historians from the post-socialist generation described the situation in a following critical manner:

The historiography of the Communist dictatorship] heavily relies on the theory of totalitarianism, in which the power structures of the state and the Party are in sharp opposition to society. [...] Moreover, not only the new social history approaches but the traditional structural social and economic history of the Communist period as well are seriously lagging behind research on power politics.³⁰

The South African historians could reasonably choose to examine the apartheid past along a similar pattern, where the National Party and international politics of the Cold War would be the main factors in shaping the history. Many, in fact, employ other perspectives. Whereas social history has a strong position in the Czech Republic in the study of older periods, we have seen above in the assessment of historiography of the state socialism that it has suddenly a little role to play when it comes to the immediate past. This contrasts strongly with the South African case, where “an emancipatory ideal has been best served by a return to the speaking subject (primarily through oral history methodologies) and in the selective appropriation of the national popular by social history”.³¹ The latter seems to be such a prolific approach that it actually invites a lot of criticism. Thus, unlike in the Czech historiography, where the “masses” of

³⁰ Pavel KOLÁŘ – Michal KOPEČEK, “A Difficult Quest for New Paradigms. Czech Historiography After 1989.” In: ANTOHI, S. – TRENCSENYI, B. – ÁPOR, P. (eds.), *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*. Budapest – New York: CEU Press 2007, p. 223.

³¹ Premesh LALU, “When Was South African History Ever Postcolonial?”. *Kronos*, vol. 2008, no. 34, p. 270.

state socialist citizens hide from a historian's eye in the shadow of powerful political players, the South African historiography, with its emphasis on social and oral history, according to its critics, Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, produces

a particular conception of individual and collective memory. [...] Collective memory is seen as the collective meanings that belong to the political field, while individual memory is also seen to be primarily part of this field as it makes sense of historical details in direct relation to political legitimacy.³²

Ergo, collectivities as well as individuals are conceptualized as over-politicized subjects according to this view. In what is basically a defense of the phenomenological dimension of the memory of apartheid, the critics dispute the encroachment of historiography on everyday life: "Tradition, memory, and orality cease to be arenas negotiating society's relationships between past and present. This is left to history and the written word."³³ Albeit Minkley and Rassool may be justified in their attempt to protect memory from history, it should still be worthy to acknowledge that within the range of historiographical approaches, those prevalent in South Africa tend to border with the sphere of collective memory (this could be the exact same reason why the memory is, according to them, so much threatened). When confronted with the predominant South African historiographical trends, should we assume that there are important constituencies in the Czech society that would welcome their deeper inscription into the history of state socialism? Or is it perhaps that a political subject would be hard to find if it were searched for "from below"?

³² Gary MINKLEY – Ciraj RASSOOL, "Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa." In: COETZEE, C. – NUTTALL, S. (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 99.

³³ *Ibid.*

The challenges faced by the Czech historiography are clearly of a different nature than the overpoliticization of collective memory. For the “totalitarian” paradigm, the political agency is located almost exclusively in the hands of former political elites. Yet the real problems stem from the peculiar erosion of borders between the state’s memorial politics, historical science, and standard criminal and judicial apparatus. Paul Ricoeur rightfully alerts us to the danger of having the distinction between historian and judge blurred:

The judge has to pass a judgment – this is the function of a judge. Judges must come to a conclusion. They must decide. They must set at an appropriate distance the guilty party and the victim, in accordance with an imperiously binary topology. All this, historians do not do, cannot do, do not want to do; and if they were to attempt it, at the risk of setting themselves up as the sole tribunal of history, this would be at the cost of acknowledging the precariousness of a judgment whose partiality, even militancy, is recognized³⁴

To be fair, it should be recognized that there are also similarities in the discipline of history in both countries. The South African historians strive to re-research and re-represent the pre-apartheid history in order to come up with a “view of history as perceived by those experiencing it within the country rather than from the colonial/settler perspective”;³⁵ pretty much the same thing goes on in the Czech Republic where

much effort has been spent filling in ‘blank spots’ ignored by Communist-era historiography. These blanks include not only periods such as the immediate postwar era, but also understudied

³⁴ Paul RICOEUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 2004, p. 320.

³⁵ COOMBES, *History After Apartheid*, p. 177.

topics such as the Holocaust, the transfer/expulsion of the Sudeten Germans and the events of 1968.³⁶

It should thus be made explicitly clear that the notion, which is emerging here, of the difference between the two historiographies and, specifically, between their preferred methods and approaches, relates solely to the occasions when the immediate past is the object.

Another principle that the two historiographies seem to share is the uneasiness about abandoning the burden of its own social as well as disciplinary history. This burden, as has been already hinted at above, consists of epistemological and methodological preferences, as well as of the concomitant choices of the objects of inquiry. Thus, on the one hand, Chad Bryant may observe in the Czech historiography a persisting tendency to emphasize the “‘factographical’ standards” and trace the tendency back to the state-socialist era, when the espousal of positivism served as a tactic that “allowed historians to employ the correct ideological language in order to present their findings, playing a sort of game which allowed them to avoid censorship (and repression) while still having their works published”.³⁷ On the other hand, Premesh Lalu can question the self-proclaimed post-colonial status of South African historiography by claiming that “those knowledge projects, such as social history, that arose in the opposition to apartheid”³⁸ continue in “the production of subject that was always, and necessarily, threaded through a structure of racial capitalism”,³⁹ instead of making way to a proper post-colonial approaches, such as subaltern studies. Hence, although the specific preferences and choices of the respective historiographies differ, as this article tries to

³⁶ Chad BRYANT, “Whose Nation?: Czech Dissidents and History Writing from a Post-1989 Perspective.” *History and Memory*, vol. 12, 2000, no. 1, p. 48–9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49, 40.

³⁸ LALU, “When Was South African History Ever Postcolonial?”, p. 267.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

demonstrate, they seem to have in common their rootedness in the recent past and in the ways in which historians attempted to bypass the political supervision of the discipline.

Making sense of the differences

At this point, it has, hopefully, been demonstrated how profoundly differently the past can be approached in post-colonial and post-socialist contexts. From the viewpoint of the advocates of locally grounded paradigms, this observation amounts to nothing else but a restatement of the obvious. However, if we accept the arguments presented in the beginning of this article that understand the post-colonial and the post-socialist experience as analogical and mutually implicated in history, the differences in public histories become an enigma.

On the one hand, the South African state has striven to provide platform and methods of transitional justice that would allow for the apartheid past to be revisited in public and that would stimulate storytelling and forgiveness. The state itself commits constitutionally to remember the past. The South African historians, in similar fashion, are ready to listen to historical actors and their primary resource is the collective memory of the former subalterns. On the other hand, the Czech state views the past as self-evident in terms of victimhood and guilt and does not hesitate to legislate these definitions. Stories need not to be told. Remembrance is required, but passed onto the work of historians. They, in turn, show only limited interest in those presumably oppressed by the state-socialist regime. Instead, they focus on the archival traces of the functioning of the oppressive apparatus and, in a somewhat tautological movement, provide the judges and the authorities with further disclosures on the predefined guilty parties. The pillars of the post-apartheid public history seem to be the responsibility of the state, reconciliation,

storytelling, and precedence of collective memory over the “uncanny”⁴⁰ of the history. The Czech post-socialist public history, in contrast, relies on the responsibility of individuals, prosecution, investigation and precedence of the archive over collective memory. In brief, the first way of making public history could be dubbed “reconciliation”, while the latter could be termed “resentment”.

The two countries, despite their respective historical, political and social circumstances, confront similar issues. How to re-imagine a community of formerly divided populations? How should the past of the division be incorporated in the national narratives? What should be remembered? How should justice be delivered? Common sense would suggest that, due to the harsher measures of the apartheid regime and its racially defined criteria, the post-apartheid South Africa should choose the path of resentment. Yet the exact opposite process seems to be taking place there. Conversely, the Czech Republic, whose state-socialist past has relatively less traumatic events in comparison with the apartheid, embarks on the road of resentment, although the divisions based on the political criteria were more porous and thus more open to the complicity of the oppressed with the oppressors.

The specific form of public history, then, does not appear to be directly related to the specific past it represents in terms of its character as colonial or state-socialist. The two seem, more or less consistently, to present the governments and academics with similar issues. Yet how should one account for the differences that were identified here at the point of the reverse mirrored institutional and epistemological strategies dealing with those issues? Rather than a particular mode of subjugation, what seems to count as more determinant is the mode of resistance to the regime. In other words, what oppressed matters less than how it was resisted. Only then can we proceed and consider also the ways in which a certain mode of subjugation

⁴⁰ RICOEUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 393ff.

facilities or prevents certain types of resistance. The higher moral ground that the South African masses oppressed by the apartheid gained as a result of unceasing collective struggle for democracy makes it possible to avoid resentment and bridge the gap between former enemies. Consequently, the history of that struggle becomes a visible object of historiographical interest. By contrast, the collaboration with the state-socialist regime in Czechoslovakia tended to erode the divide between the rulers and the ruled. The ensuing marginalization of resistance has as its corollary the marginalization of resistance as a potential object of historiography. The divide itself then has to be established retrospectively by the authority of the state, which makes reconciliation an uneasy idea.

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