

Michal Kopeček, **Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce. Zrod a počátky marxistického revizionismu ve střední Evropě 1953–1960**. Praha: Argo, 2009. 388 pp. ISBN 978-80-257-0100-3

The author of this long-awaited monograph, Michal Kopeček (born 1974), is one of the most promising young Czech historians. “Quest for the Revolution’s Lost Meaning: Origins of the Marxist Revisionism in Central Europe 1953–1960” is his slightly revised Ph.D. dissertation, defended in 2005 at the Institute of International Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences (Charles University, Prague). Kopeček, currently affiliated to the Prague Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, belongs to the generation that has already profited from substantial formative contact with Western historiography. Not only has he completed several study and research stays in Germany, Austria and the United States, but since 2008 he has been one of the principal coordinators of the international project “Socialist Dictatorship as the World of Meaning,” establishing solid contacts between the most innovative centers of historical research in Europe and the USA and the Czech historical milieu. His first book indeed represents convincing proof of how beneficial such interactions can be for historical writing.

In fact, its most original characteristics, certainly in the context of contemporary Czech historical research on the Communist dictatorship, resides in its conceptual equipment. In his analysis of early Central-European Marxist revisionism, Kopeček imports and adroitly applies notions forged on the one hand by the “Cambridge school” of the history of political thought (based around Quentin Skinner and John G.A. Pocock) emphasizing the necessary reconstruction of ideas in their historical contexts and on the other by the “deconstructive” scholars (Dominick LaCapra et al.), not to forget the German *Begriffsgeschichte*. It is needless to say that such an ambitious undertaking is unprecedented in this field of study. Kopeček certainly does not hide the fact that the evolution of political and social thought in Central Europe shows “substantial differences” (p. 39) when compared to the West European or North American experience of the twentieth century. He also admits that “political languages” (his key, Cambridge-inspired concept) have so far been studied predominantly in the context of early modern Europe. Nevertheless, his soundly constructed argument justifies this somewhat adventurous choice and successfully represents Central European Marxist revisionism as a more or less elaborate system of constantly shifting political and philosophical principles and notions offering an alternative to the institutionalized political doctrine of the Communist dictatorships and exercising a particular role in the public spheres of each of the authoritarian regimes.

The interest of this original approach is not purely intellectual but is also, in a sense, political. In the Czech context (and elsewhere in Central Europe) research topics related to the post-war period (and specifically to the “ideological” issues) remain, most often, victims of the “quasi-natural” interpretations of the witnesses (p. 41) or of various political initiatives connected with the demand for the never-ending (and impossible) “coming to terms” with the burdensome past. Kopeček’s methodological choice affords a scientifically legitimate opportunity to elude these dangerous cliffs and navigate more freely in the extremely

interesting area of political thought in Central European communist dictatorships which he presents as a specific variety of European modernity (p. 111, 123 etc.) and convincingly describes as a multilayered reality prolific in tensions and conflicts (certainly after 1953). A particular intellectual dynamic is, as a matter of fact, the main common denominator of the three case studies that constitute the core of Kopeček's analysis, each of which is centered around one key actor – Poland around Leszek Kołakowski, Hungary around György Lukács and the Czech lands around Karel Kosík.

Kopeček begins his story with a stimulating interpretation of the implementation of Marxism-Leninism in Central Europe after 1945, the generational factor being the key issue (except for Hungary). After the phase of rapid "self-sovietization" (p. 97) of local young intellectual elites at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s who were deeply involved in the revolutionary project of the creation of a new socialist society, the first signs of the inevitable process of autonomization from the rigid political views formulated by national leaders of the Party appeared soon after Stalin's death. Kopeček proposes an interesting explanation of this process based on the concept of an "unwitting intellectual cultivation" (p. 98). How did this work? The young fighters on the "philosophical front" who were determined to lead their struggle against the remnants of "bourgeois thinking" in a rigorous way could not avoid an exhaustive study of the works of their opponents. In most cases, this effort resulted in their being confronted with the intellectual impotence of anti-bourgeois campaigns and also exposed them to uncomfortable questions on the validity of some of the oversimplifying ideological precepts they were asked to transfer to their students and to preach (in a yet more vulgarized and debased version) to the masses.

1956 represents another turning point and chronological break in Kopeček's narrative. In the chapter on the problem of the legitimization of communist regimes and their relation to the "national consciousness" he puts across the intensity of the confusion of still fairly young communist philosophers (most often sincere Stalinist believers) caused by Khrushchev's revelations. Their "fundamental crisis of identity" (p. 115) led them to search for a new basis of legitimacy for the socialist project (and corresponding political regimes). From this view-point, revisionism can be interpreted as a compensation mechanism for this particular generation of Central European social scientists who, certainly after 1956, started to emphasize the socially emancipatory and radically democratic elements in Marx's thought. However, Kopeček does not forget to underline the fact that the leading role of the Party remained an overall fixture on the horizon for the revisionists and this serves as a necessary balance to the witnesses' version (focusing understandably on the democratization dimension, albeit limited, even in revisionists' thought, strictly to the internal structures of the Party). Kopeček argues persuasively that the aggressive reaction of the higher echelons of Communist Parties against revisionism (orchestrated from Moscow from autumn 1957) reflected an internal dualism in Marxism-Leninism offering both so-called scientific grounds for the legitimacy of existing political regimes and at the same time a powerful tool of critical social analysis based on Marxist historicism.

This is the general thematic and chronological frame in which Kopeček deconstructs the specifics of Polish, Hungarian and Czech revisionist constellations. He characterizes

the Polish case (with Leszek Kołakowski as the principal actor), analyzed in the first place, as the “paradigmatic” version of revisionism in Communist dictatorships (p. 211) because of its, comparatively speaking, prime political relevance in the fateful year 1956 and because of its most explicit reactive dimension. In Poland revisionists could, surely more easily than elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, communicate with and react to non-Marxist intellectual currents which were allowed to survive even in the 1950s or, more precisely, which the Polish communist leadership never succeeded in eradicating completely. The efforts of Kołakowski and his colleagues to understand their own “historical role” (p. 205) after 1956 in the context of their painful emancipation from and coming to terms with their own Stalinist youth led them instinctively toward “young Marx” and his reflection on alienation. Their ambition to reinterpret Marxism as an open way of thinking on the human condition in the modern world logically brought them near to the contemporary Western existentialism.

It is impossible to overlook another very stimulating variant of this “socialist humanism” in the Hungarian context – connected specifically to the anthropocentric ethics of Agnes Heller, one of the most talented students of György Lukács, who himself cannot but be the center of Kopeček’s Hungarian chapter entitled significantly “Dialectics of pragmatic power.” The author introduces Lukács’s story in all its amazing width and depth with its fascinating ups and downs: from the beginnings in Kun’s revolution through Vienna, Berlin and Moscow back to Hungary, where Lukács became one of the main stars of Nagy’s government, to his final fall from grace after 1956. Lukács’s dominant and imposing position (certainly intellectually justified, even Kopeček does not hide his admiration of Lukács’s works which offer “ravishing reading” p. 283) determined the character of Hungarian revisionism. This circumstance helps us to better understand the fact that the critique of Stalinism does not represent a fundamental issue in the Hungarian revisionist context. It was the collapse of European liberal democracy, the success of fascism and the apocalypse of the Second World War that constituted the formative experience of Lukács born in 1885. His ambition (passed on to his students and admirers) did not consist then in the analysis of a particular form of communist rule (Stalinism) but in a wider reflection on the legitimacy of the communist project in its historical dimension.

Contrariwise, in the Czech case analyzed in the last chapter entitled “Economy of conservative power,” coming to terms with the Stalinist episode played an essential role for young intellectuals like Ivan Sviták or Karel Kosík, who started their careers at the beginning of the 1950s when they acted as passionate vectors for the rapid sovietization of Czech academia. Similar to their Polish colleagues in their disenchantment, they had to face a comparably much less progressive Party leadership whose specialty, according to Kopeček, was to feel out the atmosphere in Moscow in order to become the conservative outpost of the Bloc – as happened for instance with the anti-revisionist campaign in 1957. Moreover, the Czech communist leaders could rely on very smart young dogmatists like Zdeněk Mlynář who as partners in the discussion were intellectually equal to the revisionist philosophers. Kopeček reconstructs even their (today not so attractive) arguments as faithfully as possible which is certainly a great asset of this book. In Kopeček’s detailed descriptions

of what at times were very esoteric debates on the relationship between theory and practice, science and propaganda, on Marxist epistemology, bureaucracy, etc., we can observe very clearly one of the principal and most interesting cleavages, i.e., the question of fundamental (according to the conservative Party ideologues and intellectuals) and not-so-fundamental (in the revisionist version) differences between capitalist and socialist societies, prefiguring in a way the still very lively (and probably never-ending) debates on totalitarianism and modernity of the communist project and social reality.

What results from this extremely stimulating analysis is indeed a picture of a very vigorous intellectual life even in the Czech lands. Kopeček thus invalidates to a certain extent one of his own conclusions stating that Czech revisionism was “beyond compare” socially less resonant than its Hungarian and Polish variants (p. 294). This is really a less than happy statement considering the fact that the question of the reception of revisionist concepts in a wider social context does not (and surely in the current phase of research cannot) constitute an adequately analyzed research problem in Kopeček’s monograph.

A more serious problem consists, however, in the comparative dimension of this book which the author himself announces as one of the principal objectives of his work (p. 17). Historical comparison is undoubtedly a very risky enterprise that turns most often into a juxtaposition of “compared” cases crowned with a few final comments on what seems similar among them. Kopeček does not fully avoid this trap for the comparative issue represents a series of sketchy appendices to the chapters (centered around “national” constellations and problematics) rather than the principal axis of his argument. But this weak point is in no way fatal for the whole opus. It could perhaps even have a very pedagogical dimension. Is it really worth investing intellectual energy to compare what people thought in different places at the same time and come to the not so surprising conclusion that roughly they thought in a very similar way? Would it not be more stimulating to analyze how concretely this happened and by means of what kind of social practices – i.e., how ideas and their authors and proponents circulated and influenced one another? The few interesting traces mentioned by Kopeček (the visits of not just Schaff, Kołakowski, Bauman but also Garaudy, Sartre, Fromm to Prague and elsewhere, the possibility of international book loans without the intervention of the censor etc.) open many fascinating questions for a truly transnational history. In this way, the book’s limitations can be perceived as added value for further research. Kopeček offers a very solid basis in the field of the history of ideas in Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century and his *Quest* helps to formulate new questions for other (hopefully more social-historically centered) quests to come. Thanks be to him for this courageous step.

Ondřej Matějka