Eva Hahnová, **Češi o Češích: Dnešní spory o dějiny**. Praha: Academia, 2018, 267 pages. ISBN 978-80-200-2839-6

Distinguishing oneself from "the other" is an indispensable feature of the process of socialization. But negative stereotyping of races, ethnicities, religions and nations is out of fashion in mainstream Western public discourse, which is a natural consequence of the genocides of World War II and the emancipation of third world countries. Eva Hahnová examines a surprising Central European deviation from the norm in her new book *Češi o Češích: Dnešní spory o dějiny [Czechs about the Czechs: Current Debates about History]*.

Hahnová is a German historian of Czech origin. She has worked as a researcher, focusing primarily on Sudeten German questions at the Collegium Carolinum in Munich between 1981–1999. Since then, she has been an independent researcher in Oldenburg. She has dedicated her recent years to studying heterostereotypes about Czechs. After thoroughly describing the German and the English perceptions of Czech people in her two previous much acclaimed studies[1] she now turns her attention to the impact those two standpoints have had on how Czechs see themselves in their self-reflections. Her walk through the contemporary landscape of sweeping statements full of contempt, arrogance and disappointment is shocking, no less for their extreme right-wing provenance than because many of their propagators are recruited from the ranks of respected former dissidents who later became democratic politicians. Her study explains why the assumption that liberal democracy is exempt from losing itself in labyrinths of ideology and purposeful manipulation is fallacious. The link Hahnová identifies between Czechs' derogatory self-stereotyping, which has been normalized over the past decades, and the current voting habits of the Czech electorate secures her book a place among the most significant studies dealing with the Czech identity in recent years.[2]

The book opens with what Hahnová calls a "lamentation gallery." In 1997, Václav Havel declared war on Czech provincialism, isolationism, egoism, short-sightedness and chauvinism in his famous speech in Prague's Rudolfinum auditorium. His skeptical view of his society, which expanded upon his earlier critique of the mentality of the submissive Czech greengrocer he had described in his book *The Power of the Powerless*, was widely shared by numerous journalists and commentators. His concerns found their symbolic fulfillment in the presidential election of 2013, when the division of Czech society was complete. In reaction to that misfortune, Hahnová sets off on a mission to uncover the roots of the repetitive negative discourses that characterized that election campaign.

The first part of the book elaborates on the content of two significant publications, the output of one author in particular, and the public reaction to the ideas found therein.

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1 Eva Hahnová, *Od Palackého k Benešovi: Německé texty o Češích, Němcích a českých zemích* (Praha: Academia, 2014); and Eva Hahnová, *Dlouhé stíny předsudků: Německé a anglické stereotypy o Češích v dějinách 20. století* (Praha: Academia, 2015).

2 See Karel Hvížďala and Jiří Přibáň, *O české státnosti a identitě: Hledání dějin* (Praha: Karolinum, 2018); Stanislav Holubec, *Ještě nejsme za vodou: Obrazy druhých a historická paměť v období postkomunistické transformace* (Praha: Scriptorium, 2015).

Hahnová analyzes Jan Patočka's *Co jsou Češi? Malý přehled fakt a pokus o vysvětlení [What are the Czechs? A Brief Overview of the Facts and an Attempt at an Explanation]*, *Češi v dějinách nové doby (Pokus o zrcadlo) [Czechs in the History of the New Age (An Attempt at a Mirror)]* by the authors' collective Podiven, and the writings of Václav Bělohradský. Her study provides a detailed state of the art of analyzing the Czech character. Hahnová chooses Patočka's posthumously published collection of letters as a springboard. The image of the Czechs that the famous phenomenologist depicted in the early 1970s clearly retains remnants of old racist and Sudeten German stereotypes. To mention only a few: we encounter stereotypes about Czechs as a "society of liberated slaves," Czech pettiness, the lack of Czech cultural independence, and the "breaking of the nation's spine" in 1938. Writing his letters to a German friend, Patočka evidently borrowed derogatory stereotypes from his addressee's national mental toolbox. The conformity of Patocka's views with those of his German correspondent unfortunately was not noticed by his followers, who later elaborated upon his ideas. Most prominently among them were Petr Pithart, Petr Příhoda and Milan Otáhal as co-authors of the above-mentioned *Češi v dějinách nové doby*. Patočka's unusual transformation of heterostereotypes into autostereotypes was thus obscured.

One of the central themes of Hahnová's book is the clash between two approaches commonly used to assess the past. Patočka's approach was a purely philosophical one – he consciously and deliberately followed a different epistemological tradition than the one historians usually follow and worked with the concept of "meaning." He was not looking for the "truth." Hahnová sees the fact that philosophers do not usually bother to rack their brains over historical facts as a perilous mistake. Her arguments against discounting the facts are based on her detailed knowledge of discursive continuities that she has unearthed in the philosophical literature. The core of her book explores the link between the anti-Czech stereotypes propagated in the 1930s and 1940s by the German National Socialists and derogatory stereotypes of Czechs formulated by Czech philosophers (and a few historians). In light of the importance of this previously neglected connection, it seems that Hahnová, a historian, wins this round of the debate over the philosophers. On top of that, she opens up enormous space for future research, which can focus on the psychological and sociological underpinnings of the ideas the Czech philosophers were transmitting.

It is, however, self-evident that neither historians nor philosophers, both of whom see themselves as sole custodians of historical wisdom, can reconcile the rift between them.[3] Hahnová describes the main problems of the philosophical approach very well, even though it is debatable whether philosophers can be held responsible for the simplification and vulgarization of their thoughts by journalists and politicians, who are the primary actors who diffuse toxic stereotypes. What she cannot do is take a similarly

[3] For a particularly telling example of this, see the debate "Nad knihou Evy Hahnové Češi o Češích" organized by the revue *Literární noviny* on May 30, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-5vcgy_NPNU.

detached view of her own field. She is an active participant in the post-1989 great debates in Czech historiography (mainly the one concerning the expulsion of Sudeten Germans after World War II). At the same time, it is important to point out that crude stereotyping is much less widespread among contemporary Czech historians than in the general public space.

While the first part of Hahnová's book focuses on the proponents of negative self-stereotypes in the late Communist era and after the Velvet Revolution, the second part covers many topics. A special chapter is dedicated to the First Czechoslovak Republic. It is a counterweight to the exceptional amount of energy that has been devoted to shallowly defaming the Republic, compared to other historical periods. The last chapter returns to the image of the Czechs produced during World War II. Hahnová makes one of her strongest points by demonstrating how dangerous an inconsistent reading of history can be. The great figures of Czech history have been misinterpreted countless times, not always intentionally. That has been the case with Edvard Beneš and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, as well as Emanuel Rádl and Josef Pekař.

Hahnová repeatedly emphasizes that any assessment of history should take into consideration a postmodern understanding of "normality." Applying that to her case study of the Czechs, she concludes that the Czechs are a diverse group of individuals who are not now and never have been any better or worse than any other nation. Similarly, the nineteenth century revival of Czech nationalism, which is often mocked for its allegedly chauvinist underpinnings, was no different from the struggle for self-determination of other European national communities. This logically brings her to another problem with generalizing statements – the need for a comparative approach. Very few studies of the Czech nation take developments in other countries in the region into consideration, not to mention in more distant countries.

Another extremely harmful feature of the public debate about the Czech character is relying on individuals to assess national character. The best example in Czech historiography of transferring distaste for one individual's behavior to the national profile is the stereotype of the "broken spine of the nation." According to Jan Patočka and his successors, Edvard Beneš chose "Czech smallness" over greatness in the Munich Crisis of 1938 and condemned his nation to eternal moral inferiority. A seemingly limitless variety of other stereotypes are linked to this theme, including the one about the Czechs' inability to understand democracy due to the influence of communism. To demonstrate how absurd this instrumentalization of a complex historical situation actually is, Hahnová compares the Czech case to its twentieth century German and Russian parallels. Did the acts of Hitler or Stalin determine the moral profiles of Germans and Russians? Hahnová contends that both features of the contemporary debate about the Czech national identity – questioning the normality of the nation and transferring the decisions of individuals onto the national mentality – are harmful to the development of a free and democratic society.

Češi o Češích: Dnešní spory o dějinách is an extremely valuable publication which should spark a necessary dialogue between the academic and lay spheres of Czech society. From her position as a historian, Hahnová condemns Czechs' negative self-stereotypes

because of their extreme right-wing provenance, which unfortunately goes unrecognized by the propagators of those stereotypes and by their audiences. Her application of the general principles of postmodern social science to the historical and philosophical literature she examines increases the value of what otherwise would be only a well-done *tour d'horizon*. Her book's most powerful message is that the Czech nation should be considered normal and not an exceptionally good or bad one.

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