

## Doctoral Dissertation Review

*Unlearned Social Change: A Study of Transitory Order*

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The dissertation, *Unlearned Social Change: A Study of Transitory Order*, is a qualitative study in historical sociology, which focuses on the period of 1995-2013 in Czech politics, society and economy. The author centers on this historical stage, which he refers to as a “dubious era” (p. 8) of overlapping politics and economy, one he claims has been understudied and only recently recognized as a distinctive period in research on transition.

The thesis is written in English, it is 210 pages in length, including 3 pages of appendices and 10 pages of bibliography. The manuscript is divided into 3 main chapters and a foreword and a conclusion. The first chapter is a methodological and theoretical introduction. Here, Tomášek introduces main concepts and provides an historical overview of what he refers to as “the transitory order.” He claims that while politically we can observe varied developments in different post-communist countries of Central Europe, economically, these countries share the experience of free-market reforms, which “did not lead to true replication of the western free-market model and its patterns of functioning but resulted rather in multiplying features distinctive for transformative politics and economy.” (p13) He looks at explanatory models for this “paradox,” such as ‘incomplete transformation,’ ‘premature consolidation,’ or ‘restoration.’ (pp. 13-14) He centers particularly on the concept of ‘premature consolidation’ and argues that “the complete and full-scale transformation in CEE countries will be achieved

only in the course of and due to actual incorporation into the EU” and not prior to it. (p. 4) He illustrates the development of his research on this matter by referring to and citing numerous papers he has written on the subject since 2000, such as his paper of 2007 where he points to the emerging feature of the post-socialist world - “murky exchanges that would be regarded as clearly illegal in the Western context but which in CEE contributed substantially to the ‘founding’ of private capital and the speedy injection of it into the veins of the new free-market system under construction.” (20)

Tomášek notes that the transitory order coincided with Europeanization (European accession process) and was characterized by dubious mechanisms typified by spheres of overlapping politics and economy. (p. 21) Historically, his research field includes two periods – 1995-2004 (post-privatization/secondary privatization) and 2004-2013 (post-EU entry to the reconstitution of the Czech political scene in 2013). Methodologically, the dissertation, the author declares, is based on an analysis (using open coding) of “particular instances of happenings and problematic occurrences in intersecting spheres of politics and economy in the Czech Republic” (p. 24) as they were covered in two weekly periodicals – *Respekt* and *Ekonom*.

In the first chapter, the author reviews the different conceptualizations of the post-1989 period, referring to major theoretical trends in the social sciences. He reviews the “transition vs. transformation” debate, followed by “transformation, capitalism by design and path-dependency” discussion and finally, “premature consolidation and state capture.” Overall, he brings out four waves of conceptualizations of post-1989 social changes in Central Europe: 1) transition; 2) democratic consolidation; 3) transformation and path-dependency; 4) premature consolidation, restoration and state capture. He argues that the development has seen “an overlap of socio-economic and political interests that have been affecting the regulation and institutional build-up of newly constructed socio-economic and political systems” (p. 37), which were followed by Europeanization. In the second part of the introductory chapter, the author reviews selected social theories that have been applied to in the analysis of social change in post-1989 Central Europe, including pluralist theory, systemic crisis approach, neoclassical approach, institutional economy and cultural approached to social change. In a final subchapter titled, *Social Change as Collective Memory*

*Representation*, the author presents his concept of transition incorporating different approaches to collective memory.

In the second chapter of his dissertation, *Beyond Privatization and Europeanization: The Czech Republic Case*, Tomášek reviews the concept of privatization, whose emergence he traces to Western Europe in the 1980s. He distinguishes this “traditional” privatization of state assets from the process that took place in the Czech Republic from 1990 onwards, carried out with great speed in the raw post-communist landscape characterized by legal gaps and inconsistencies. “Unprecedentedly extensive amounts of state property subjected to the process aggravated the lack of legally nonexistent capital and moved the process far from the regular free-market procedures along with rhetorics [sic] of privatization switch in the ‘shortest possible time’.” (p. 77) He reviews the ‘voucher privatization’ and the ‘big privatization’ schemes and points to legal and technical problems that accompanied the process initially praised by domestic and foreign analysts, which, however, led to outcomes that are the subject of his analysis.

He then proceeds to the presentation and analysis of his research data, focusing on “grey zones and phenomena” in two distinct periods – 1995-2004 and 2004-2013. Concerning the first period, he looks primarily at ‘tunnelling’ – asset stripping widely practiced in the Czech context – and shows a variety of strategies in how it was practiced. He also pays attention to the many wide-spread bankruptcies of the banking and insurance sectors; he then traces the development of attitudes toward the EU during this first period considering their “transition strategies” and focuses on Euroscepticism as a political tactic. In this section of the dissertation the author draws extensively on research by political scientists – both domestic and international – and includes party typologies concerning EU attitudes.

Tomášek distinguishes the first privatization and post-privatization period from the period following the accession to the EU. “It seems that the EU and its accession may indeed be thanked for the end of the so-called ‘bank socialism’.” However, he adds: “With the end of post-privatization/secondary privatization allowing for inappropriate public support to various entities or even often rather an explicit asset stripping ... public resources expropriating activities in a wider sense began to emerge on a large scale *in the sphere of*

*public administration and associated agencies and funds and state-owned enterprises.*" (p. 114) He then illustrates these exploitative practices on the example of state agencies and funds, ministries, regional authorities and state-owned enterprises. Tomášek also develops the category of 'The World for Itself' to encompass "a specific area of hard-to-describe 'the world emerging for itself' or better said 'worlds' reaching (sometimes quite far) beyond the simple continuity with the environment of state administration and beyond the visible politics, i.e. something perceivable or imaginable as 'taking over politics' or fulfilling politics through economic actors seemingly not related and not intersected with it." (p. 121) He describes various exemplifications of this category. I consider this section quite original and of key importance and wonder if the author (in case he would publish the thesis) may consider centering on this category as one of his chief contributions.

In the final chapter, *Discussion: Institutions, Systemic Crisis, Culture?* the author reflects on different scholarly approaches to the analysis of post-1989 developments that culminated in the 2013 reconstitution of the Czech political scene. He returns here to many of the concepts introduced in chapter 1 but devotes attention specifically to the emergence of the "dubious" sphere of political and economic overlap in the transitory order. He postulates that classical approaches which see the grey zone in which politics and economy mix in the categories of illegality and corruption may not be adequate to explaining the situation of Central European countries such as the Czech Republic. Instead, seeing these practices in the categories of hybridity may capture more accurately the "extensively informal and shadowy character of the economy under the conditions of prolonged incomplete transition/transformation/social change..." (p. 177). Importantly, he asks the question of "whether hybridity is not the characteristic feature of Central European capitalism or rather of the transformation to a free-market system. At the same time, we may ask whether the capacity for hybridity is not a more general feature of contemporary globalizing capitalism..." (p. 191).

Marcel Tomášek needs to be commended on wide span of concepts and literatures he has reviewed and used in his dissertation. The dissertation shows interdisciplinary knowledge of economics, sociology, history and political science. He also demonstrates a very good historical knowledge of the period and processes analyzed. There is no question that he has delved deeply into the topic, which he has researched for many years. Some of the original

concepts introduced are a result of deep research and reflection, and represent an original contribution to historical sociology and transition/transformation studies.

In term of critical comments, I must note that the dissertation's language is quite difficult to understand, and I wonder if writing it in Czech would have been a better choice. There are some sections that I, in fact, found almost impossible to grasp, such as the subchapter, *Social Change as Collective Representation*. It was also unclear to me how the author proceeded with the analysis of his primary research data from *Respekt* and *Ekonom* – a clearer description of research steps and explicit referencing of research data would be desirable. Finally, the thesis would benefit from a clear statement of the main findings and summaries of arguments.

Despite these shortcomings, I evaluate Marcel Tomášek's dissertation positively. It represents original research that contributes to the advancement in the field of historical sociology, especially in the area of transition/transformation studies of post-communist Central Europe. Based on my positive evaluation, I posit that Marcel Tomášek's be allowed to proceed to further stages of the doctoral procedure.



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Prof. Hana Cervinkova