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French Responses to the Prague Spring: Connections, (Mis)perception and Appropriation

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Looking at the vast literature on the events of 1968 in various European countries, it is striking that the histories of '1968' of the Western and Eastern halves of the continent are largely still written separately.¹ Nevertheless, despite the very different political and socio-economic contexts, the protest movements on both sides of the Iron Curtain shared a number of characteristics. The 1968 events in Czechoslovakia and Western Europe were, reduced to the basics, investigations into the possibility of marrying social justice with liberty, and thus reflected a tension within European Marxism. This essay provides an analysis specifically of the responses by the French left—the Communist Party, the student movements and the *gauchistes*—to the Prague Spring, characterised by misunderstandings and strategic appropriation. The Prague Spring was seen by both the reformist and the radical left in France as a moderate movement. This limited interpretation of the Prague Spring as a liberal democratic project continues to inform our memory of it.

Grand narratives of '1968'

One way to understand the continental scope of '1968', I propose, is by interpreting it as the culmination point of a set of challenges posed to the various traditions of European Marxism. The Prague Spring was in this sense the Czechoslovak variant of a European-wide phenomenon in the 1960s, namely, the emergence of hybrid, creative new strands of Marxist interpretation. In countries such as Italy, France, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the emergence of 'heterodox' or 'revisionist' interpretations of Marxism as of the early 1960s was related to generational change, the end of the post-war era and the weakening of political identities which based their legitimacy on anti-fascism and a specific interpretation of World War Two—such as state communism in the East and Soviet-aligned communism in the West. It was, further, a belated effect of the multiple disruptions of 1956, namely the de-Stalinisation process and the Hungarian revolution and its suppression.²

'1968' confronted the various traditions of the Marxist left in Europe with an issue it had long forgotten: liberty. A key and shared issue for all Prague Spring protagonists

was how to marry social justice with liberty. The notion of liberty here included national liberty and national sovereignty, both with regard to the Soviet Union and in terms of relations between the Czech and Slovak nations; intellectual and creative liberty, including also the protection of individual liberties *vis-à-vis* the state; political liberty, involving the central questions of overcoming the Stalinist past and establishing a form of political pluralism; and socio-economic liberty, including managerial autonomy, self-management for workers and the organisation of factory councils. Also in France, the re-emergence of liberty in Marxist debates and practice was a central feature of the 1968 events. This was clear not only from the students' and anarchists' fierce opposition to the Communist Party's authoritarianism, but also from the new left's investigations into libertarian interpretations of Marxism, and from the centrality of the notion of *autogestion* in the search for self-management and self-control of industrial workers.

Yet, these common themes shared by the 1968 protests in East and West are revealed only with hindsight; they are an analytical device rather than a reality actually experienced at the time. Responses to the Prague Spring by the various actors of the left in France in 1968 were characterised by misreadings, as the events were systematically and strategically interpreted through the lens of the dramatic domestic political developments. Misunderstandings of the Prague Spring occurred in all West European countries, but in Italy, for instance, the left as a whole showed itself more genuinely interested in the events and debates in Czechoslovakia (Bracke [2007](#), pp. 167-75). France is an interesting case for contradictory reasons—on the one hand, the lack of genuine engagement with the Czechoslovak developments, and on the other hand, the broad instrumentalisation of these events in the context of the radical social and political battles at home. Before turning to these French perceptions, I will highlight a few aspects of the origins and developments of the Prague Spring which can illustrate the central concern of marrying social justice with liberty.

'Against the dehumanising forces of capitalism, fascism and Stalinism': the nature of the Prague Spring

Most of the recent literature on the 1968 events in Czechoslovakia has either not engaged with the political nature and ideological roots of the Prague Spring (dealing primarily with the conflict with the Soviet Union, or analysing power struggles within the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) while dealing only to a limited extent with ideological debates in society at large),³ or has attempted to interpret the political agenda of the critical writers and playwrights such as Václav Havel and Ludvík Vaculík from a liberal, pro-Western perspective.⁴ However, what is absent from recent narratives is a discussion of the kinds of Marxism to which the protagonists of the Prague Spring adhered.⁵ The most radical dimensions of the Prague Spring, I suggest, have been 'forgotten', not only because of the ideological ramifications of today's debates on Central and East European (CEE) history, but also because many observers in Western Europe at the time had an interest in presenting it as a liberal democratic project, as will be illustrated below for the case of France.

In his 1971 study of the intellectual origins of the Prague Spring, Vladimir Kusin proposed that, reduced to its simplest dilemma, the Prague Spring was about developing 'a socially just form of democracy' (Kusin [1971](#), pp. 1-2). It was a context in which the nature of both socialism and democracy were being investigated, in a debate that, while not fully free, was significantly less constrained than it had been previously. However, what complicates our historical reading of the debates on socialism and democracy is the fact that the discourse of the 'deepening' or 'perfecting' of 'socialist democracy' was one that had been employed by the communists in power during the Novotný period. From the late 1950s those breaking away from this discourse, such as Zdeněk Mlynář and Ota Šik, wished to reclaim both the words socialism and democracy because they firmly believed that these stood for something very different to what Czechoslovak neo-Stalinism had to offer. Yet, the confusion of terminology made it harder for their contemporaries in Czechoslovakia, as well as for analysts ever since, to distinguish between political views aimed at preserving the status quo, and those aimed at upsetting it.

In addition, it may be objected that it was only due to (self-)censorship and (self-)discipline that the reform projects were couched in Marxist discourse, thus disguising an unspoken wish to abandon Marxist analysis. Censorship began to be relaxed in February 1968, and by late March censors had effectively ceased to exercise control, thus giving way to the emergence of 'public opinion as a powerful force' (Skilling [1976](#)).⁶ Admittedly, it is reasonable to assume that the formal abolition of censorship did not produce overnight the effect of an entire nation daring to and being capable of openly questioning the foundations of its political system and discourse. However, to present this as the only reason for the explicitly socialist nature of the reform ideas is to dismiss the importance of the Marxist tradition in Czechoslovakia. It will be illustrated here that for the various protagonists of the Prague Spring, Marxist discourse was not merely a tactical device, but rather a matter of critical investigation of its purpose and usefulness.

Clearly, important differences existed between the various actors in terms of how they related to Marxism, not least between on the one hand, the reform communists in the leadership of the KSČ such as Alexander Dubček and Oldřich Černík, and on the other hand, the intellectual leaders of the more critical movement of cultural revival, such as Václav Havel and Ludvík Vaculík.⁷ Nonetheless, all these Prague Spring protagonists shared a core of political values and intellectual legacies. A commitment to Marxism and a dislike and rejection of free-market capitalism were central characteristics of Czechoslovakia's political and intellectual cultures, and had been since the 1930s. The influence of Marxism as a political culture in 1960s Czechoslovakia was not directly affected by the de-legitimation of Stalinism. The rejection of Stalinism was unambiguous among the leaders of the revival movement, in public opinion at large, and even among the reform Communist Party leaders—although, to be sure, a set of taboos remained in place which impeded an actual historical analysis of Stalinism. Still, cleansing Czechoslovak society and politics from the many remnants of Stalinism lies at the heart of the Prague Spring and was indeed one of the key unifying elements of often diverging agendas. However, for the leaders of the reform and revival movements this did not mean that rejecting Stalinism could be equated with rejecting Marxism and socialism.

Re-interpretations of Marxism in Czechoslovakia found their origins in the years following 1956 in the debates among philosophers, writers and playwrights. As argued by James Satterwhite, a generation of philosophers and political theorists started utilising Marxism against the Party leadership—first cautiously, but towards 1968 in more explicit terms (Satterwhite 2002, pp. 115-34). Writings by Karel Kosík and Ivan Sviták were especially innovative and politically influential. Kosík theorised the centrality of everyday, practical exchanges in man's existence and consciousness and attempted to create links between Marxism, phenomenology and existentialism. The influence of the French existentialists as well as Georg Lukács were evident through his notion of 'dialectics of the concrete'. Praxis was given a humanist meaning reminiscent of Lukács, understood as a creative way of living in the world. This discussion implied a fundamental critique of the Communist Party, though on the basis of a fresh Marxist analysis. Kosík discussed Communist Party ideology as a set of self-sufficient views, estranged from reality. Marxism, by contrast, was in his view the philosophical expression of the experiences of the working classes, a much more authentic reflection of actual, concrete life experiences. In the context of the Prague Spring, Kosík's emphasis on praxis and agency came to be interpreted as a powerful call to dissidence and action.⁸

Innovative artists, intellectuals and writers, who were key in preparing the ground for the Prague Spring in the decade preceding it, also used Marxist methods to develop a critique of communist rule, by emphasising the political nature of artistic creation. Furthermore, the debates in the Writers' Union at the end of 1967, which directly prompted a change in the power relations within the KSČ leadership and facilitated Dubček's coming to power, reflected a re-investigation of Marxist methods as well as social concerns. Critical writers such as Antonín J. Liehm developed an attack on socialist realism in the arts, and new plays and novels no longer dealt primarily with Party heroes but with ordinary people with everyday feelings and dilemmas. Resistance to artistic dogma and calls for freedom of expression were the channels through which the Communist Party rule was criticised more generally. However, these were not calls for a 'neutral', value-free, or non-political form of art; quite to the contrary, the critics all emphasised the political role of art, in its duty to represent the concrete living conditions of ordinary people. As posed by Liehm, socialism needed to rid culture of 'two Diktats', those of power and those of the market, of arbitrary government and of liberalism. He further proposed that the political system should guarantee not only the individual freedom of creation, but also access to culture for all sections of the population in equal measure (Kusin [1971](#), pp. 57-58).

Socio-economic liberty was debated through the ideas of self-management and factory councils. As early as 1957, a number of economic experts, among them future Prague Spring protagonist Ota Šik, started to invoke Marx against (neo-)Stalinism, as well as to positively reassess aspects of Yugoslav 'revisionism'. By the mid-1960s, the Institute for Economics, led by Šik, had become a creative laboratory for economic reform blueprints. Among the advocates of reform there was no general call for the abandoning of the planned economy; rather, debates and propositions were more complex, and can be summed up, as suggested by Skilling, as an investigation into 'planned market socialism' (Skilling [1976](#), pp. 119-25). It was proposed that production plans should be more accurate and realistic, less prestige-oriented, less centralised, more diversified and devolved, and they should involve low-level decision making with participation from the various parties in the production units.

One of Šik's collaborators, Čestmír Kožušník, critically explored the notion of socialisation of the means of production, and came to argue that ownership by the state did not mean collectivisation and that 'social ownership' should benefit all of society, the employees foremost (Kusin [1971](#), p. 86). Furthermore, the factory council experiments were central to economic reform in Czechoslovakia and also to debates in other East European countries and to the left in Western Europe. There was broad agreement among the reformers—including Šik and Mlynář among others—that making the planned economy more efficient should be accompanied by making it more democratic, by allowing for input into the organisation and planning of production not only by managers, but also by employees. While the April Programme announced the creation in the factories of 'democratic organs' representing the views and interests of the workers, it was only in June that a network of factory councils was established by the KSČ throughout the country. However, a tension existed between more democratic views on what the factory councils should be, proposing authoritative organs through which workers would exercise a form of self-management, and a more technocratic view, which preferred to see workers' control limited by managerial authority. While those focusing on greater managerial autonomy sought inspiration in Western social democracy, those privileging the theme of grassroots participation in the factories looked at alternative communist models, such as that of Yugoslavia (Skilling [1976](#), pp. 433-41). In the working class, the search for alternative ways of organising power relations on the factory floor was articulated through arguments in favour of greater trade union autonomy against the Soviet model of union subordination *vis-à-vis* the Party (Grémion [1985](#), pp. 40-42).

While economic reform proved hardest to implement in practice, political reform was the area in which disagreements were most explicit, particularly in the weeks preceding the invasion. Most influential here was Zdeněk Mlynář, whose thinking from the late 1950s onwards centred on the role of the Party, both in relation to the masses and to the state. In the mid-1960s his ideas moved on rapidly, as he abandoned the vague notion of the 'masses' and developed a more complex vision of civil society as the locus of power. Modes of political representation became the key question, and as it was accepted now that there were different, sometimes conflicting, interests in society which all needed to be represented adequately,⁹ the debate came to hinge upon the issue of political pluralism. Notions of representation and participation were not limited to the Party. Other structures were envisaged, especially on the local and workplace levels, such as Mlynář's notions of 'National Committees', which would have autonomy over a number of policy areas at the local level, and the 'working teams', which were to elect councils in workplaces (Kusin [1971](#), pp. 107-08, 115).

Critiques of both the East European one party practice and the West European multiparty system were important. Věnek Šilhán for example, director of the Research Institute of the Economics of Industry and Construction and a strong advocate of economic and political reform, stated that the multiparty concept had also become obsolete in Western Europe. Free elections and the rotation of power between different parties in no way guaranteed the adequate representation of different interests, he argued (Skilling [1976](#), p. 439). Mlynář's blueprint included the reinstatement of the National Front, no longer as the ossified mockery of pluralism which it had become under Stalinism, but as the centre of power, defining overall policy. It was to be made up of representatives of the Communist and other parties, as well as representatives of various social organisations, including trade unions and

women's organisations. Yet, the role to be played by the Communist Party in this new political system remained the sore point. What was clear, however, was that in the context of rising political awareness, a majority in public opinion saw the development of a more democratic form of socialism as crucially dependent on the Communist Party's unambiguous abandonment of its power monopoly. According to an August 1968 opinion poll, 81% of respondents favoured the two formally recognised parties—the National Socialist Party (*Československá strana národně socialistická*) and the People's Party (*Československá strana lidová*)—becoming 'really autonomous' of and 'equal partners' to the KSČ (Skilling [1976](#), p. 545).¹⁰

Despite the increasingly outspoken critiques of the KSČ reform leadership between April and July by the politicised sections of society, public opinion, according to polls taken between February and August, while increasingly critical of the Dubček leadership, did continue to believe that the reforms would strengthen democracy.¹¹ The most visible expression of radicalisation outwith the Party was the creation of organisations which were commonly referred to as parties but were never recognised by the state as such. One example was KAN, the 'Club of Committed Non-Party members' (*Klub angažovaných nestraníků*), which defined its aims in its manifesto of May 1968 in terms of 'contributing to a new political system, never realised so far, of democratic socialism' (Navrátil *et al.* [1988](#), pp. 156-58). It favoured a multiparty system and 'the defense of civil liberties' such as free speech. Its impact on public debate was reflected in the rapid growth of its membership, from 144 founding members to 3,000 on the eve of the invasion. KAN's founding manifesto offered elements for an investigation of the 'political, ethical and philosophical foundations' of the Czechoslovak nation and state. There were three such foundations, it was said, and they should form the basis of politics in Czechoslovakia because of their historical importance to its people. First, human and civil rights and civil equality (there was reference here to the United Nations as well as to the 'defence of these rights against the dehumanising forces of capitalism, fascism and Stalinism'). Secondly, the humanist tradition of Czechoslovak culture, 'which greatly inspired the advancement of our nations ... rather than on the battlefield ... or in multiplying material wellbeing'. The third principle was 'democratic socialism', which ought to be combined with 'the noble programme of individual freedom'. The Stalinist past was referred to as a 'violation in our national traditions of humanism, democracy and socialism' (Navrátil *et al.* [1988](#), pp. 156-58).

Tension between the Communist Party leadership and the intellectuals reached a boiling point at the time of the publication on 27 June 1968 of the 'Two Thousand Words Manifesto' by writer Ludvík Vaculík.¹² The text proposed a powerful re-interpretation of Czechoslovak post-war history, which diametrically opposed the official KSČ narrative and expressed what many had quietly known: 'The first threat to our national life was from the war; then came other evil days and events that endangered the nation's spiritual wellbeing and character. Most of the nation welcomed the socialist program with high hopes, but it fell into the hands of the wrong people' (Navrátil *et al.* [1988](#), p. 177). Vaculík voiced his anger at 20 years of (neo-)Stalinist rule in the most powerful way when he referred to the instrumentalisation of the notion of working class politics by the KSČ: 'The chief sin and deception of these rulers was to have explained their own whims as the "will of the workers". ... Every worker knows they had virtually no say in deciding anything' (Navrátil *et al.* [1988](#), p. 178). Vaculík proposed that beyond the disputes between

writers and Party leaders, the key force of change was located at the grassroots, among the masses of workers and ordinary people. 'The everyday quality of our future democracy depends on what happens *in* the factories and on what happens *to* the factories' (Navrátil *et al.* [1988](#), p. 180). It is clear that even the most outspoken critics of Communist Party rule were unwilling to abandon the notion of a political legitimacy based on concern for social equality and on an investigation into the living and working conditions of ordinary people.

'Everything remains to be imagined': interpretations on the French left

Viewed in a longer-term historical interpretation of European Marxism, the 1968 events in France, too, can be understood as the re-emergence of the question of liberty in relation to politics based on social justice. Yet, the differences between the ways in which some of these fundamental dilemmas of Marxism were articulated in France on the one hand and in Czechoslovakia on the other, and the very different political and socio-cultural contexts in which these debates were situated, gave rise to a number of misinterpretations. 'Socialism with a human face' as it was being debated in Prague, inspired the student radicals and small leftist parties ('*gauchistes*') only in a very limited way; and, as will be discussed below, Dubček's reform communism presented the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) with an embarrassment more than anything else. To the moderate socialist forces—the *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) and the newly formed *Fédération de la gauche démocratique et socialiste* (FGDS)—the events in Czechoslovakia mattered only to the extent to which they impacted on their relations with the PCF. In sum, the French left understood little of the nature of the Prague Spring, projected its own conflicts and debates onto the events in Prague, and in some cases, although more so in the 1970s than in 1968, French responses to the Prague Spring were a matter of strategic appropriation.¹³

Political discourse in France in the context of the student and worker protests between March and June hinged on the dichotomy of revolution versus reform. Reform was fiercely and unambiguously rejected by student protesters and radical leftist groups; instead, it was revolution that needed to be re-invented, re-invested and re-created. The rejection of reformism—which in this context could be defined as an institutionally managed transformation to socialism, in which a key role was reserved for political parties and trade unions, social bargaining and parliamentary action—was based on an analysis of the situation in Western Europe, and what was seen as the integration of the working classes into the capitalist system. Related to this were fierce critiques of the strategies of the traditional left, the communist and socialist parties and the trade unions connected to them. In a discursive context where 'revolution' was the central object of both enquiry and desire, the KSČ reformers, unlike Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara, did not satisfy the need for charismatic leaders; and neither did the critical intellectuals of the revival movement, who were often portrayed as bourgeois thinkers disconnected from the working classes and ordinary people. One of the influential Trotskyist groups, *Lutte ouvrière*, largely dismissed the KSČ's attempts at reform of the existing system, and its weekly paper stated that the Prague Spring was 'not likely to develop into a genuine situation of revolutionary socialism'. It qualified the Prague Spring as: 'limited by the popular strata it represents as well as by its political content', and as nationalist and chauvinist. The paper in early

July still considered it very unlikely that the Soviet Union would put an end to the Prague Spring by military means, as there were 'no signs of popular revolt'.¹⁴

One issue which did receive attention in France during May and June 1968, was the factory councils. However, the fact that the council movement in Czechoslovakia—very differently to what had happened in Hungary in 1956—was largely a KSČ initiative, made it hard for the *gauchistes* to relate to it, and led once more to misunderstandings. The notion of factory councils was loaded with historical significance in the French left, related as it was to the Paris Commune of 1871. The Trotskyist groups specifically placed it at the centre of their political discourse in 1968, linking it to *autogestion* and the working classes' appropriation of full control over the production process, thus placing it in a revolutionary, workerist tradition. Quite distinctly, the 'new left', the *Parti socialiste unifié* (PSU) and the left-catholic trade union *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), invented a new meaning for it, as part of what was presented as a new model of democratic socialism different to both Stalinism and social democracy. Here, factory councils were invoked as a crucial dimension of participatory democracy, and a necessary compensation for the limitations of representative parliamentarism. While the popular student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit often referred to the revolutionary nature of factory councils, including also those in Czechoslovakia, other student leaders and intellectuals, such as Cornelius Castoriadis, noted the limited role played by the working classes in the Czechoslovak factory councils.¹⁵ To all these groups, their support or lack thereof for the councils in Czechoslovakia was largely rhetorical and functional to their political legitimacy and symbolic battles at home, rather than an actual investigation of their nature.

It was sections of what is referred to here as the 'new left', which attempted to politically appropriate the Prague Spring, primarily in its dimension of cultural revival. The newspaper which identified most with the PSU and the new left, the daily *Le nouvel observateur*, noted and positively appreciated elements of a liberal-bourgeois democratic tradition in the Prague Spring.¹⁶ It expected the emerging of this tradition to be the outcome of the debates between Dubček and the critical revival movement. *Le nouvel observateur's* analysis of harmonious relations between the reform communists and the critical intellectuals, against conservatives in the KSČ (Held 1968), was largely a mistaken one and the fruit of wishful thinking. It was motivated by a wish to have an impact on the situation of the French left and in the PCF more specifically, and implied a critique of the (neo-)Stalinists in the PCF and support for those who were seen as the Party's more progressive, moderate leaders, such as General Secretary Waldeck Rochet. The Prague Spring was seen by both the PSU and *Le nouvel observateur* as a model of democratic socialism, to be followed in France through the coming to power of a broad left-of-centre alliance, reformist but also modern and in touch with young people's critiques and movements. As the only ideological current in the French left, *Le nouvel observateur* perceived connections between the 1968 events in Western and Eastern Europe, and situated them in the global Cold War context. It wished to see the Prague Spring as the herald of a new international and European order that would help to undermine the existing 'social and political status quo' in Europe and the static bipolar world, characterised by superpower hegemony over the old continent:

They [the Prague Spring protagonists] resemble the French revolutionaries of May ... The Czechoslovak reformers know that they find themselves in *terra incognita*. Everything remains to be imagined and constructed ... The world divided between neo-capitalists and neo-Stalinists risks one day to be upset by this, and in a good way. (Held [1968](#))

Ironically, thus, both the 'far left' and the 'new left' interpreted the Prague Spring as a reformist movement that was moving towards the adoption of market-based social democracy—but did so with different degrees of enthusiasm. It was this discursive context which placed the leadership of the French Communist Party (PCF) in a position from which it was forced to defend the revolutionary (rather than reformist) nature of the Prague Spring, without, however, ever being convinced of this. The PCF was traditionally very loyal to the USSR although since 1964, under the leadership of Waldeck Rochet, it had given some proof of a cautious distancing from Moscow.¹⁷ Now it experienced much difficulty in defining what the Prague Spring was and how it related to Soviet-style 'orthodoxy'. Thus, the PCF's responses to Dubček's changes between January and April shifted between lack of interest and tolerance *vis-à-vis* certain aspects of it, and a taboo on the questions it raised regarding de-Stalinisation. In so far as the PCF leadership did lend its support to the Prague Spring, it was formalistic rather than substantial, that is to say, motivated by a willingness to defend the formal principles of party autonomy and state sovereignty. At no point did the PCF take the Prague Spring as an example for its own policies, and the Party refused to allow the changes in Czechoslovakia to lead to a wider debate on socialism and democracy, in contrast to, for example, currents within the Italian Communist Party (*Partita Comunista Italiano*, PCI) (Bracke [2007](#), pp. 167-75).

While the PCF's daily paper *Humanité* did carefully hint at some of the structural problems of the Czechoslovak communist system which had provoked the leadership change in the KSČ (economic recession, the Slovak question and need for a separation of party and state institutions), the fundamentally new character of Dubček's policies was consciously ignored.¹⁸ One reason why the PCF needed to emphasise the continuum between Soviet-style communism and Dubček's 'socialism with a human face' was the taboo on Stalinism. For a party which itself had failed to carry out a consistent de-Stalinisation, either organisationally or ideologically, it was impossible to discuss the rejection of Stalinism as a key motive behind Dubček's reforms. In early April the PCF *Secretariat* dryly noted that the KSČ's April Programme 'ought to be considered positive'; not, however, for the innovations it was expected to bring about, but because it allegedly showed Dubček's readiness to combat 'certain attempts to threaten socialism'.¹⁹ Indeed, if support for Dubček was never more than lukewarm, the PCF leadership had little or no confidence in the socialist credentials of the intellectuals of the revival movement. As of April, the 'danger of the rightist forces' was increasingly stressed. For example, *Humanité* referred to instances of criticism of Prime Minister Černík which had appeared in *Rudé právo*, as a dangerous case of 'the political debate becoming personal' (Acquaviva [1968](#), p. 3). The 'Two Thousand Words Manifesto' was largely ignored by the PCF press, thus indicating the Party's disagreement with it (Deli [1981](#), p. 94).

As the intellectuals' criticisms of Dubček mounted towards the summer, so did the PCF's attempts at discrediting them, and their veiled yet clear warnings to the KSČ to regain control over civil society. In old-fashioned Leninist style, the PCF press

reminded the Czechoslovak communists of the 'leading role of the Communist Party' when reporting the developments in Prague (Hentges [1968b](#), p. 3). Internally, the PCF leadership was, in fact, even more preoccupied with the 'rightist' dimensions of the Prague Spring than it would seem from its public statements. In an elaborate *Bureau politique* report, for internal discussion only, PCF envoy to Prague, Philippa Hentges, emphasised the country's economic problems, as well as its request for a loan from West Germany. According to this analysis, there were further negative points also: the increasing influence of the 'petty bourgeoisie'; the 'fascination with the West in certain layers of the population'; disagreements in the leading organs of the KSČ on issues such as the economic programme; and political opposition ('problems created by the adversary').²⁰ Thus, when General Secretary Waldeck Rochet went to speak to Dubček in Prague on 19 July, following his meeting with Soviet leaders in Moscow, he did so not because he wished to 'save' the Prague Spring, as some of the literature has argued, but with an urgent request to undo the Prague Spring reforms and re-establish full Communist Party control, as the only way to avoid a now near-certain invasion.²¹

While the Party line was one which at all times abstained from genuine support for the experiment in 'socialism with a human face', a number of intellectuals connected to the PCF appropriated the project, invoking it as a useful example for the development of democratic socialism. In doing so, their aim was to provoke debate and changes within the PCF. Philosopher Roger Garaudy saw connections between the intellectual revival in Czechoslovakia and his own exploration of the humanistic and democratic character of Marxism. The Action Programme seemed to confirm his view that both the notion of class and the leading role of the Communist Party needed to be reconsidered (Grémion [1985](#); Streiff [2001](#), p. 500). The intellectuals connected to the journal *Les lettres francaises*, Pierre Daix and Louis Aragon in particular, granted extensive attention to the cultural revival—although they too abstained from publishing the 'Two Thousand Words Manifesto'. Their points of reference in Czechoslovakia were not the Party leaders but rather the critical writers and the journal *Literární listy*. Daix in his *Journal de Prague* discussed the problems of the Novotný regime (which he labelled as 'absolute monarchy centralism') and the ways in which it was criticised in the liberalised political climate. He wrote at length on the issue of the Stalinist trials, and denounced the 'demagogic workerism' of pre-1968 Czechoslovakia, which, according to him, 'did not correspond to the ideal of socialism'.²² All this sounded like criticism of the PCF itself, motivated by the hope to see a change from within its structures, as seemed to have occurred in the KSČ.

The Prague Spring and its contested memory

The above analysis does not explain why the Prague Spring, and particularly certain aspects of it such as the factory councils, acquired the status of myth on the left in France and elsewhere in Western Europe. In fact, it was only after the Soviet-led invasion of August 1968 that the Prague Spring, misrepresented if represented at all before August, was appropriated by the various sections of the French left, which thus also backdated their own support for it. The Prague Spring became in the 1970s a standard weapon in the historical and political arsenal of the communist, socialist and intellectual left in France. While the factory councils started to receive much more attention among French intellectuals, such as André Gorz, in 1969, it was only in the

mid-1970s that the two major parties of the left, the PCF and the Nouveau PS led by François Mitterrand, rediscovered the Prague Spring and invested it with symbolic and identitarian meaning. This, as analysed by Grémion, took place in the context of their bid for governmental power through the *Union de la gauche*, and the urgent need for a shared model or point of reference that could clarify what the two parties meant by 'democratic socialism' (Grémion [1985](#), pp. 199-234). Internationally, the re-appropriation took place in the context of the rise and fall of Eurocommunism in 1974-1977, during which the Spanish and Italian Communist Party leaderships often referred to the Prague Spring as their preferred model for socialism—in a way that was significantly more genuine than was the case for the PCF leadership of George Marchais.

This belated identification with the Prague Spring took place in the wider context of discrediting of the most radical political agendas of *Mai '68*—by a conservative backlash, by the PCF and PS, and by some former *soixante-huitards* themselves. As a result, the Prague Spring now needed to be presented as a fully social democratic and reformist project, a perspective that has remained the predominant one in Europe generally, particularly since the collapse of Soviet-style communism between 1989 and 1991. Current academic and public debate on the history of Central and East Europe under communism seems to be dominated largely by a grand narrative according to which all dissident and even reform movements expressed the wish to adopt liberal-democratic and free-market values. The history of political conflict in CEE is thus reduced to a teleologically inspired story of these societies' inevitable adoption of a 'West European' political and socio-economic model, through what has been called a 'rectifying revolution' (Habermas [1990](#)). While this interpretation holds for some of the dissident movements in CEE, the history of opposition movements to Soviet-style communism is, as it is argued here in relation to the Prague Spring, far more complex. Investigations of reform as well as dissident movements in CEE during communism can only benefit from an understanding of how they related to the traditions of European Marxism.

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Notes

In the English-language literature, 'the sixties' as an object of study usually refers primarily to the industrialised Western world. Developments in Eastern Europe are

either not included or when they are analysed they often do not have a significant impact on the overall line of argument. A recent example is Schildt and Siegfried ([2006](#)).

On the importance of the 1956 events to the emergence of dissident Marxism in Czechoslovakia, see Kusin ([1971](#), pp. 19-27).

This is the case for, for example, the studies by Mark Kramer and Kieran Williams (Kramer [1998](#), pp. 111-71; Williams [1997](#)).

See for example Keane ([1999](#)). However, in earlier work, Keane has interpreted Havel and Charter 77 as expressing the ideals of democratic socialism (Keane [1985](#), pp. 7-9).

A useful exception is Tucker's discussion of the philosophical foundations of the Czech dissident movement post-1968; he asserts that it would be a mistake to understand Czech dissidents as 'ardent anti-communists' (Tucker [2000](#), pp. 9-10).

For more on the end of censorship and the development of the press, see Skilling ([1976](#), pp. 196-201).

I follow here the broad consensus in the literature on the Prague Spring as consisting of two dimensions: a top-down, Communist Party-led reform movement, and a more spontaneous bottom-up movement of cultural and intellectual revival.

See for example his article 'Naše nynější krize', published in *Literární listy* in April 1968 (Kosík [1968](#)).

See for example Šik's view in his influential work *Economics, Interests, Politics* (1962), that 'society is the assertion of interests of one social group against the interests of another' (quoted in Kusin [1971](#), p. 102).

On the interpretation of these polls and their shortcomings, see Skilling ([1976](#), pp. 528-32).

This was the answer given by 88% of respondents in a poll in late March (Skilling [1976](#), p. 41).

The 2,000 words referred to 'Two Thousand Words that belong to Workers, Farmers, Officials, Scientists, Artists and Everybody'. The manifesto is reproduced in Navrátil *et al.* ([1988](#), pp. 177-81).

I am here largely in agreement with the general argument in Grémion ([1985](#)).

All quotes from 'Menaces soviétiques contre la Tchécoslovaquie', *Lutte ouvrière*, 3 July 1968, p. 1. All translations from French primary sources are the author's.

More details are given in Grémion ([1985](#), pp. 110-16).

Elements of this can be seen in Lentin ([1968](#)) and Held ([1968](#)).

For more detail see Bracke ([2007](#), pp. 117-20).

See for example Acquaviva ([1968](#), p. 3). On PCF coverage of the Prague Spring, see also Daix ([1980](#), p. 242).

Archives Parti communiste français (Place Colonel Fabien, Paris), box *Secrétariat* (agenda and conclusions), 2 April 1968.

See Hentges ([1968b](#)); Archives PCF, box 'Tchécoslovaquie—Plissonnier', folder III, file 2.

More detail in Bracke ([2007](#), pp. 162-65). I disagree here with Vigreux ([2000](#)), who sees Rochet's 'parallel diplomacy' as illustrative of his support for Dubček.