Exploring ordinary resources of an extraordinary power: Toward ethnomethodological study of the communist regime[1]

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ABSTRACT: Understanding the communist past of Central and Eastern European countries is a persisting task even today, 15 years after the fall of the iron curtain. Dominant political discourses, media images and legal documents push through the following idea of communism: it was something, which originated in a few extra-ordinary, single and far-reaching events (such as violent turnovers, revolutions, military interventions, and colossal intellectual failures); which was based and dependent on a totally controlled and clearly located, centralized power (e.g., the power of a Central Committee of the Communist Party); and which is essentially incommensurable with other political/social regimes (i.e., with democracies in the West and with the new democratic regimes in the region). This tendency is particularly strong if the issue of communism is addressed explicitly and on a general level. At many other occasions, however, when we focus upon situated and practically oriented actions of different social actors, both in the present and in the past, the picture looks different and more complicated. A space for ethnomethodologically inspired study of the communist regime opens up and ordinary resources of the extraordinary power become visible. To show the charm and relevance of such an approach, very much neglected in this field of research, I will use an example of a study undertaken together with my colleague Zuzana Kusá from Bratislava: we have chosen the example of political screenings in former Czechoslovakia to demonstrate the local production of power relations that constituted the reality of the political regime. The analysis of detailed narrative accounts of events that happened in early 1970s suggests that an inverted, non-totalitarian theoretical interpretation of communism is feasible, which better corresponds to the lived, practical experience of involved actors: the power of communists was made real and durable not so much by means of total control, unconditional subsumption and clear-cut categorizations, but rather by means of flexible and subtle identity-work and of partial connections.

I am honored and pleased to have the opportunity to give a talk at this conference. I thank very much to the organizers for inviting me. But I am afraid I do not fully deserve the invitation and want you to be warned in time – I am neither ethnomethodologist nor conversation analyst. My current research field is sociology of science, technology and politics and I am quite eclectic and pragmatic as for theory and methodology. EM, nonetheless, belongs to my favorite intellectual traditions and I have even done some work that might be from a sufficient distance considered ethnomethodological.

The ethnomethodological content of my speech cannot be a revelation for the audience of this conference. I still hope, however, that I might not be exceedingly boring. First, I will talk about a topic that has been, to my best knowledge, only rarely associated with EM and CA, i.e., Eastern European communism of the second half of the last century and the problem of communist power. Further, I will complement it by some thoughts on the developments of sociology in the region (with special respect to ethnomethodology).

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[1] Prepared as a plenary speech for the International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis Conference, Bentley College, Waltham, MA (USA), August 6-9, 2005. This speech makes extensive use of the paper "Political screenings as trials of strength: Making the communist power/lessness real" (Konopásek & Kusá subm.) – I thank to my co-author, Zuzana Kusá, for allowing me to do this.

Let me begin with precisely this latter topic. In the Czech Republic ethnomethodology is a text-book notion. Most sociologists know the term and especially younger colleagues and students even seem to understand its basic concepts. Practical uses of EM, however, are rare.

It is characteristic that EM and CA have been more appropriated by some Czech linguists rather than by sociologists. Therefore, these approaches have become associated more with techniques for analyzing speech and linguistic interactions (remarkable by its punctual transcriptions and analytical vocabulary hardly understandable to outsiders) rather than an approach for addressing the question of social order.[2] Usually, such occasional uses of EM and CA aim at a better understanding of media representations or political discourse (Leudar, Marsland & Nekvapil 2004; Leudar & Nekvapil 2000).

A highly authoritative Czech book defending and explaining qualitative approaches in sociology, an isolated monograph of the after-1989 period ever discussing EM,[3] presents EM as a uselessly radical school that simply requires too much and pushes the mission of interpretive sociology to an absurd extreme (Petrusek 1993). In EM, Petrusek argues, the social reality is irreparably decomposed into myriads of dyadic interactions (p. 141) which leads to its erosion and disappearance. Ethnomethodologists, he says, omitted everything that is imposed on people from outside – such as power. Although not explicitly mentioned in the book, an experience from state socialism may play a role in such a refusal and in the limited reception of EM among Czech sociologists. It is often supposed that EM is a kind of game-like pursuit suitable only for minor, "soft" and unimportant issues; but if one is interested in a "hard" force such as the communist power or in the serious, practical and urgent issues of societal transformation then one should turn to a "real" sociology.

You see that I am not coming from an ethnomethodological paradise. But I am here to improve the picture – a little bit, at least. Since I appreciate EM not as a study of certain "sectors or layers" of reality (such as language, micro-interactions), but rather as a specific perspective on sociological problems, it comes as a no surprise that in this speech I would like to resist the tendency mentioned above and suggest an alternative to it. I will argue that something like communist power is precisely the kind of challenge that allows the ethnomethodological perspective to be applied within a truly sociological exercise, addressing key and practical issues of social order.

But first, let me to briefly comment on why the communist power is still something worth of sociological study. Why the force defeated in 1989 deserves our attention *as a problem*.

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An amendment (405/2000 Sb.) of the Czech Penal Code, approved in 2000, says:

> Whoever would publicly contest, question, approve or try to justify the Nazi or communist genocide or other Nazis' or communists' crimes will be punished by confinement (minimum 6 months, maximum 3 years). §261a

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[2] I admit that this is a more general tendency, observed elsewhere too (e.g., Pollner 1991). But here a counter-tendency is practically missing.

[3] Under communism "interpretive approaches" almost did not exist in the Czech (Czechoslovak) sociology. To put it perhaps too roughly, social scientists living in the communist Czechoslovakia up to 1989 were weak, isolated from their Western colleagues, and tightly kept either within the boards of Marxism-Leninism or of a standard survey-based research, which was – if applied "technically" enough – quite harmless for the regime. Nonetheless, exceptional theoretical treatments on ethnomethodology appeared in Slovak, in the form (under the disguise) of a conversant Marxist "critique" of the American social science (Alieva, e.g., 1976, 1979, 1985).

Why is this paragraph so interesting? Sure, a particularly fervent right-wing Czech politician might eventually indict me, on the basis of this law, for making foundations of the communist past[4] problematic and uncertain – but this is not why I have mentioned it. Neither I want to draw your attention to the fact that the law puts Nazism and communism into the same category. What is really interesting for me is to look at the list of people found guilty and punished by the Czech courts for participation in the "communist crimes". Actually, you would count the people unconditionally condemned since 1989 almost only with five fingers of your hand. About 20 people has been punished conditionally, by a probation.[5] Given the indisputably criminal nature of the regime, crimes of which are so big that they are sanctioned by a special law, the numbers are ridiculously low. In fact, not me, but the Czech judicial sphere should be the first one accused on the basis of the paragraph 261a of questioning or even refuting – in a very practical way – the communist crimes.

But I am *not* charging here the Czech courts, police investigators and other administrative bodies. Rather, I am questioning the above mentioned particular paragraph of the law. It is a nice illustration of how useless and inappropriate general statements about the communist regime are face to face with "ethnographic" details that have to be gathered during legal procedures and during their preparation. In other words, the criminal nature of the regime is often clear *in general*; but it is questionable and very difficult to grasp when it comes to "real life" of *specific cases*. Perhaps the law indicates that the entire approach to the communist past that it represents is worth reconsidering.

Let me take one more example. Almost exactly six years ago, in a TV political talk show, two politicians argued about the communist past.[6] One of them (Jan Ruml) was former dissident, during communism persecuted by the police and doomed to low qualified jobs; after 1989, as a Minister of Interior, he was responsible for a reform of the police and for handling with its communist archives; at the time of the talk show he was a leading politician of a right-wing party. The other (Václav Exner) was a deputy in the parliament, a long-time and prominent member of the Communist Party (and very probably a former confidant of the communist secret police). At one moment they were discussing an ongoing anti-globalization demonstration and a confrontation between the police and some demonstrating people. An association with demonstrations in Czechoslovakia after the occupation of the country by the Soviet army in 1968 has been made (it was a couple of days after the anniversary of this event). This association started a sharp controversy – here is the hottest moment:

> Moderator: Let me just to make sure about what we are talking. We are comparing the year of 1969, when demonstrations against the Soviet occupation took place, with the demonstrations, say, of antifascists and communist youth against NATO – these things are [turning to Exner] according to you the same.

> Ruml [interrupting, agitated]: This is what I madly disagree about, because it isn't… these are incommensurable periods!

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[4] I.e., the taken-for-granted distinctions between the powerful and the powerless, between the active and those passive, between communists and non-communists, between normal and abnormal and even between totalitarianism and democracy, between the communist East and the capitalist West.

[5] Tens of people have been formally accused, but subsequently released for some reasons. These are up-to-date figures taken from the web site of The Office for the Documentation and the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (http://www.mvcr.cz/policie/udv/english/index.html).

[6] *Nedělní partie*, TV Prima, August 22, 1999.

Exner [trying to answer the question of the moderator]:They aren't… there are certain moments that are… the same. It is a manifestation of political attitudes…

Ruml [interrupting]: … these are … absolutely incommensurable periods.

Exner [continuing]: … and also it is the same in that repressive forces were involved in both cases.

The former dissident Ruml insists on an incommensurability of communism and post-communism. He says, repeatedly and with great emphasis, that totalitarianism and democracy cannot be compared *at all*. It is alarming for him to juxtapose the two. And Exner, the communist, who relativizes the difference between the two political regimes by pointing to certain *partial* similarities makes him desperate. But in fact, during the talk show Ruml constantly does compare communism with democracy, even more than his opponent; he puts one against another. The term "totalitarianism" defines "democracy" as its opposite or negation and vice versa. He juxtaposes the two not as particular manifestations, but only as abstract wholes. By doing so he maintains an absolute border dividing the two types of political regimes into two monolithic blocks, entirely different from each other. He believes that the value of democracy would be best defended against people like Exner, the communist, if we keep the difference between democracy and communism as simple and clear as possible. To achieve this the difference has to be located somewhere very, very deep (as a difference in essence) or somewhere very high (in abstract terms). Such an approach is the same in kind as the one embodied in the law discussed above.

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One could find the logic introduced above virtually everywhere: in media presentations, in political debates and, often very strongly, in academic discourses. The logic is grounded in a complex pattern the basic assumptions of which are the following:

First, communism was something, which was constituted by a few extra-ordinary, single and far-reaching events - by more or less violent turnovers or revolutions (such as in 1948 in Czechoslovakia), by military interventions (such as in 1968) or by colossal intellectual or moral failures of individual people. As a Czech politician and former dissident, Stanislav Deváty, put it in his remark on the developments after 1989:

Nobody knew [after 1989] how to proceed from communism to democracy. We had experienced it the other way round in 1948 – *it had been done in two days*, that time. (Lidové noviny, 28.11.1998; italics added by the author)

But if this really is the case, if it had really been done in two days, the communist power could hardly represent a *sociological* problem. To understand the change of the regime sociologically, we have to take into account not only what happened long *before* the turn over, but – above all – many things that happened long *after* the revolutionary events. If Bruno Latour, a French sociologist of science, says that the fate of facts is in later users' hands and the qualities of facts are thus a consequence, not a cause, of a collective action (Latour 1987), we may put it in an analogous way: the "force" of the communist putsch itself cannot explain the "force" of the state socialist regime that followed and lasted for several decades. Rather, we should study what other actors subsequently did with the "naked" and unfortified reality of the socialist revolution; namely, how people, while following very different goals and trajectories, translated and re-translated the communist doctrine into practical and ordinary life. How they resisted it or gave way to it. How they appropriated it or subverted it. How they actively pursued it or ignored it.

Second, according to popular beliefs, legal definitions and also many academic discourses, the communist regime was based and dependent on a totally controlled and clearly located, centralized power (e.g., the power of a Central Committee of the Communist Party). "When power is regarded as thinglike, as something solid, real and material, as something an agent has, then this represents power in its most pervasive and concrete mode," writes Clegg (1989: 207). This conception of power not only creates the illusion of a clear distribution of responsibilities (of "bad guys" controlling and oppressing "good guys"), but also unjustifiably takes the communist power for granted, i.e., as an already and accomplished fact the existence of which need not be further explored. Indeed, this power is then understood as a force that is always at hand to explain almost anything about communism. Why people retreated into privacy. Why the grey economy and social networks flourished. Why the spheres of work and public life merged together. And so on.

But such a conception corresponds fully neither to *practical life* nor to the *official doctrine*. Gross (1988: 120) writes: "The real power of a totalitarian state results from its being at the disposal of every inhabitant, available for hire at a moment's notice." The communist power was so powerful, according to him, not because it was in the hands of the few, but, on the contrary, that it was made, in a sense, available to anyone, anytime, anywhere – above all, through the mechanism of denunciation. This is a remarkable point. And we should appreciate how perfectly it is mirrored even in the official doctrine, i.e., in the Statutes of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia: "The power of the Party consist in its firm association with people," it is clearly stated in the text. People usually take this as an empty statement and a mere cloak for the fact that all the power was concentrated in the hands of a few top-level Party members. But we sociologists should believe the words more – that is, we should believe not perhaps to the communists, but to these words that are truer than it seems. That is why I suggest that instead of taking the communist power for granted and using it for explaining different aspects of ordinary life under state socialism, we should try doing the opposite, i.e., to empirically study the particular and observable associations that constitute networks of the ordinary and use our findings for better understanding of the communist power. In short, the power of communists should not be used to explain the life under communism. Quite the opposite: the life under communism – its networks, its associations, its practices – should explain the communists' power.

Third and last, as we have seen in the example of the TV talk show, the reality of communism is very often considered essentially incommensurable with the reality of "normal" (democratic, Western, capitalist) societies. This has had, among others, important consequences for the social sciences in my country. At first, the fall of communism seemed to be a big chance for social scientists of the region. The transforming society was said to be a unique laboratory that must be fascinating for colleagues all around the world. Everything was OK with this assumption except for one seemingly innocent, "promotional" word: *unique*. This little word has eaten all the chances. Historians, political scientists and sociologists alike started emphasizing uniqueness of the (post)communist reality they were studying – indeed, its absolute specificity and incommensurability with anything else. Understandably, this lead to an isolation. The (post)communist studies became attractive only for those who were interested in the Eastern Europe and its communist history (or specific post-communist present). The interests and work of all the others, made incommensurable, remained beyond the horizon. (Post)communist studies formed an academic ghetto with its own conferences, journals, academic celebrities and standards.

This has been a lost chance that cannot be really repaired. But some lessons can be learned anyway if one is still interested in the problem of communist power. It might be a good strategy not to start with the assumption that the power of communists is of a different nature

than various forms of power in contemporary democratic societies. Probably the easiest way how to suspend such an assumption is to suspend well-established notions of political theory and of social transformations (conforming to the view of communism criticized above) and look at mundane, *ordinary* resources of this extraordinary power. More specifically: can the communist power be studied ethnomethodologically, for instance as a common sociological problem of social order?

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I believe it can be and in this second half of my presentation I will give you an analytical example that, in a way, turns the big concepts of political theory of communism on their head.

A couple of years ago, I made an analysis, together with my Slovak friend and colleague Zuzana Kusá, of short extracts from two biographical narratives.[7] The extracts were personal accounts of political screenings that had taken place in Czechoslovakia in 1970 at the advent of so called „normalization".[8] We analyzed in depth the two episodes in order to show how the ordered reality in general, and power relations in particular, are created and re-created by the participants. By tracing how the ordered, the stable, the durable, the irreversible, the unequal, the hierarchical, the other was produced and sustained during the political screenings we hope to provide an insight into the nature of the communist power.

Why did we choose the screenings as the event to be scrutinized? First, we chose these passages as narratives about crises of the self-evident and taken-for-granted order. Our narrators as well as the screening commissions explicitly draw attention to the problem of members' trustworthiness and reliability. This itself is a promising start of an inquiry into the work of ordering. But more was at stake. The situation of political screenings was as an especially challenging case for the kind of non-essentialist approach implied above. Why? In the first view, the screenings had a clear meaning: those at power were reaffirming their victory, their safely dominant position. Their power was already "there". Members of screening committees could do almost anything. Above all, they could ask dangerous questions. Their powerful position was allowing that. It was firm and certain. The summoned people, on the other hand, seemed powerless. They were challenged in many respects. Their positions and jobs were uncertain. Their identities were in question… The relation between those who organized the screenings and those who were screened therefore seemed highly asymmetrical. And the game seemed over. But it was our ambition to show the screenings as an ongoing game and the communist power as a power *in the making*.

The narratives present two particular cases in which the power of communists was made (a bit more) real, since it seemed to acquire the status of a well-established fact or of a relatively unproblematic object. Both our narrators "successfully" passed through the screenings. Not quite smoothly, however. It was a painful process, which required an important "work" from both sides. The question is: what kind of work it was and what consequences the collaborative

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[7] Both narratives were recorded within the research project "20the century in the Slovak intelligentsia families" carried out by Zuzana Kusá in 1991-1994. Names of the narrators have been changed. The full transcripts of the passages on the screenings are in the Appendix.

[8] A note of explanation: *Screenings* were massively organized check-ups of Party members and certain categories of professionals (regardless their membership in the Party). There have been several waves of screenings during the history of state socialism in our country. The screenings we are talking about were organized at the outset of the 1970s and had hundreds of thousands participants and countless local configurations. Typically, however, they had the form of asking about one's standpoints on the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army in 1968. *Normalization* meant elimination, in every aspect of life, of all traces of the politically more liberal sixties. In other words, it meant return from "experimental" socialism (with a "human face") to a "normal" socialism.

effort has had? And how the things that happened shaped the terrain of communist power? Let us start with how our narrators carefully categorize participants' memberships in the Communist Party.[9]

Both the narrators mention persons that were representatives of the communist power and *at the same time* their „good acquaintances", or even „good friends", or simply someone *else* than a communist. Here is, for instance, Miloš's description of his economy director Š., a member of the screening committee:

9.   Otherwise, he was Jano Š. from P.,
10.   Lutheran,
11.   good acquaintance to us,
12.   who became Party member for nothing but
13.   having chance to become deputy-director for economy in the company and then on the headquarters
14.   Otherwise he was not a convinced communist,
15.   we called each other first name,
16.   and we spoke totally differently in private than
17.   he used to speak when he was holding a speech on Party political training meetings.

We see, on the line 14, that the director is identified as "not a convinced communist". The probability that he would act as a real communist is further decreased by the reference to his reasons for joining the Communist Party (lines 12-13). His Party membership was purely instrumental. It was necessitated by his interest in obtaining the position of a leading manager. Another reason why the director is not reducible to a simple category of communist is his family origin. By introducing director's name and place of birth (line 9) Miloš informs us – the knowing members of his culture – about a family relation between Jano Š. and one of the "founding fathers" of the Czechoslovak state (established in 1918) who was known for his dedication to higher moral principles. Since it is commonly believed that personal qualities are cultivated and transmitted within one's family, such an information can be understood as an indication of moral qualities of the director. The line 10 tells us about his belonging to the same Lutheran church (in Slovakia minor) as the narrator's (Miloš is son and grandson of Lutheran pastors). Affiliation to a minor community is usually and habitually associated with members' commitment to a mutual solidarity.

These membership categorizations – i.e., the affiliation to a generally honored family and to the same church, the friendly relations and, also, a high professional achievement (Miloš too describes himself repeatedly as a devoted professional) – produce the director as a half-real communist; undoubtedly an element of the network constituting the communist power, but firmly entangled into many *other* networks as well. And precisely this provides a sufficiently firm and even intelligible ground for negotiations between Miloš and his director about the screenings. Multiple memberships, in their very complexity and mutual overlapping, create an important space for maneuvering. Actually, only they enable us to properly understand the entire story – it would simply not make sense without the subtle categorization work.

In the first view, therefore, we are witnessing here an erosion and disintegration of the communist power. The key instrument of the regime for distinguishing "loyal people" from

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[9] In this section we use Sacks' (1992) membership categorization analysis (see also, e.g., Silverman 1998) to study how the narrators, with the help of a background knowledge shared by members of the given culture, make (more or less) indirect classifications of others and themselves.

"class enemies" has been colonized by other interests and commitments. Certain associations appear as strong as those constituting the reality of screenings, if not stronger. A space for negotiation is opening up. The director Š., for instance, is reconstituted as an actor who deviates from the formal category of communist and uncompromising member of the commission.

On the other hand, however, all these "imperfections" produce one important "final" result: Miloš passes the screenings. He becomes a stabilized and stabilizing element in the network of communist power, a loyal, unproblematic and reliable citizen. As such, he adds irreversibility and strength to the network, which is – after all – the goal of the entire screening process. This successful enrolment (Callon & Law 1982) is not a simple confirmation of an existing power, but rather its translation and specific enactment. Indeed, this is how the communist power becomes real during the screenings: not only the summoned people are checked-up, but also family origins, church communities, special motives for joining the Party, professional achievements, old friendships, personal integrity, and other people identities are challenged and mobilized to prove their "realness", their strength. If they are strong enough, the regime is strong enough. In other words, the communist power is enacted, here and now, *together with* all these elements, not regardless of them or even despite them.

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Now, let me turn your attention to the other case. Here is a part of the Pavol's story speaking of a crucial moment when the feared question about the military invasion was put:

9. And they asked me
10. how I see the entry of the (Warsaw pact) military troops, whether it was necessary or not.
11. I said
12. definitely – from their perspective, of course,
13. but I am not quite sure about it, I continued, from our perspective.
14. They said: Pali, go out to the lobby and have a five minute walk,
15. think it over
16. if it was necessary also from our perspective.

We are witnessing a critical situation here, no doubt. Pavol did not get through with the answer that allowed him to keep, in a way, his face. But he got a second chance. How? He got a *friendly advice*. He was sent out to the lobby (to a "backstage") to "think the issue over". But even more. The formal space of the screenings was radically redefined. Right on the spot. Suddenly, the members of the commission addressed Pavol not in the way that was typical and appropriate for the setting ("comrade", "sudruh", "tovarišč") but by a diminutive of his first name. They call him Pali (line 14) and even pick up his irony (lines 15-16). Now, for a short moment, Pavol is among friends. (As Sacks was quoted yesterday, during the conference debates: "you select the name form, you select the relationship" – that is the point.)

The switch from the public to a private space, however, is a chance given not only to Pavol. Being suddenly "in private" is an opportunity for the commission as well. First, "being in private" for a moment allows the commission members to mobilize such exceptional means like sending Pavol behind the door for a five-minute walk to "re-think" his answer. Also, it allows them to signal the following important message for Pavol: Don't take the situation too seriously, too dramatically! Nothing much has really changed, we are still friends. We are still able to create a private space together. But of course, this is not only a message for Pavol, it

also is a form of self-assurance. It was not only crucial for Pavol and the commission that Pavol would pass through, but it was equally important for all of them that they could sustain their professional and personal relations in the future. Last but not least, the commission members, by switching to a private mode of talking, suspend the political and moral significance or seriousness of Pavol's answers. They de-politicize what they want him to say, making it thus less real and binding.

This does not imply, however, that the entire process meant nothing serious for the participants. Not at all. It was painful, consequential and ethically challenging. This is evident in places where the participants strive for a reduction of moral burdens and tensions:

> 26.   So I went back and said (laughter)
> 27.   okay, I have thought it over,
> 28.   it was necessary
> 29.   even from our perspective.
> 30.   They started to guffaw, to laugh,
> 31.   then we hand-shook and that was the end of the story.

As observed by Harvey Sacks (Silverman 1998) and many others, laughter can be seen as something that turns potentially challenging behavior – such as suicide threats – into a ceremonial form, into a joke – that is a routine part of the everyday world we inhabit. The laughter of the commission members mentioned in the line 30 can therefore be understood as a means for solving a moral dilemma. It gave the situation a theatrical character: it all was just for audience, not really. Therefore, nobody needed to feel guilty. Neither Pavol for the denial of his own opinion, nor the commission for forcing him to do it.

But there is another laughter observable in the extract. It is not the laughter of the members of the commission, but the *laughter of Pavol* noted in the "scenic note" in the line 26). In fact, the Pavol's laughter extends the reality of the other laughter: from the past into the presence. The thirty years old laughter of the commission members was still making sense at the time of the research interview, sometimes in the beginning of 90s. And the teller helped, by that "narrative" laughing, the "real" laughter doing its work – i.e., to make the situation more acceptable *for all the participants*. Can there ever be a better proof of the high moral charge of the studied event than the laughter that is so big, so loaded with what needs to become less fatal and serious, that it spreads over several decades?

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How to summarize the analysis? The screenings were to check political reliability of members of the Communist Party as well as some non-members (management people, teachers, higher professionals). Those found unreliable often subsequently lost their jobs and had other sorts of difficulties. In fact, it was a massive purge that followed the occupation of Czechoslovakia by allied forces in 1968. This purge was one of the actions that started the era of so called normalization.

The screenings are usually perceived as a *consequence* of the victory of pro-Soviet hard-core communists backed-up by the Soviet tanks in the streets. These people could organize the screenings because they were in power. Yet, backed-up by the ethnomethodological notion of social order, we can suppose that the power of communists during the normalization period could not be made out of the presence of tanks and foreign troops themselves (after all, these left Czechoslovakia only some time *after* the fall of the regime). Something else had to be added. Countless elements that together produce a resilient and shareable order.

We analyzed in this little piece of work how the "successful" screenings were produced as a meaningful and bearable reality by all its participants. What have we seen? Strange things: Members of the commission whose behavior cannot be simply associated with the category of "communist"; in fact, a rich and complex membership categorization is needed to make the story understandable. Enrolment of the screeners in the network of communist power was relatively weak and only partial. Further, the official, formal and highly asymmetrical setting could be temporarily turned into a private space where participants are helping each other. Finally, a number of devices for making the entire event less consequential, less serious and less authentic was used on both sides.

It seems that the screenings that (re)constituted durability of the communist regime would not be "successful" without all these manifestations of a half-real communism, or rather of half-communism/half-something-else. We can perhaps suggest, on the basis of our observations, that the *partial connections* (Strathern 1991) constituting the network of communist power should not be seen as weaknesses but rather as sources of strength. The regime passed through this and other trials of strength thanks to them, not despite them. Indeed, they were precisely these partial connections, enrolments, mobilizations, and categorizations that preserved the space for negotiating and maneuvering even during the much-feared party screenings. The screenings could simply occur in an acceptable and accountable way (for both sides).[10]

This is interesting since the logic of totalitarianism is often associated with *unambiguous*, direct and *absolute* control; with *total* subsumption and clear-cut hierarchies; with power concentrated into a single centre. Totalitarian regimes, people think, go against any plurality and independence. Our analysis shows, however, that a quite different picture may equally be well plausible. Even under state socialism, under the totalitarian regime, nothing was really "total". On the contrary: plurality, heterogeneity and partiality, relative independence, flexibility and autonomy of particular agents, played an important role in making the regime alive.

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To sum up the entire paper, ethnomethodology is often considered in the Czech Republic (and elsewhere too) not as a real sociology, because it cannot deal with big, important and indisputable things such as the power of the communist regime. But my argument, which I briefly illustrated by the analysis, suggests that while studying the communist power ethnomethodologically we realize that EM is not (necessarily) a study of "small things" and communism is not (necessarily) a "big thing". In other words:

1) As far as EM is a study of social order, it cannot be considered as a study of "small and unimportant" things. Social order in the making is not something that can be either small or big (see also Hilbert 1990, Garfinkel 2002: 67, note 1).

2) There are good reasons for considering the communist power as a phenomena of social order – and as such it can be an interesting object of an ethnomethodologically inspired research. In the light of ethnomethodology, the communist power appears to be as ordinary as phone calls to a mental health help line or jazz improvisations, and almost as much important.

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[10] As Star and Griesemer (1989: 389) pointed out, unless a dominator uses coercion it is necessary for him or her to maintain the integrity of the interests of the others (who are to be dominated or controlled) in order to retain them as allies.

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Appendix: Full sequenced transcript of the used extracts of narratives

The first extract is from the life-history narrative of Miloš A., lawyer, non-party man, born in 1921.

Miloš's story:
1.   Then the year of 1968 came
2.   and as a consequence of the fact that our Party secretary had kept
3.   all the petitions written after the occupation in his drawer,
4.   the screenings in our company were basically mild.
5.   the Central Committee did not send anybody to us.
6.   We were…
7.   we were told in advance by our economic director
8.   how the screenings would proceed.
9.   Otherwise, he was Jano Š. from P.,
10.   Lutheran,
11.   good acquaintance to us,
12.   who became Party member for nothing but
13.   having chance to become deputy-director for economy in the company and then on the headquarters
14.   Otherwise he was not a convinced communist,
15.   we called each other first name,
16.   and we spoke totally differently in private than
17.   he used to speak when he was holding a speech and on Party political training meetings.
18.   Anyway, it became commonplace to see such hypocrisy during these long years.
19.   So when we learned what sorts of questions are usually posed during the screenings
20.   we asked him urgently not to ask us whether
21.   we agree with the entry of the troops.
22.   "Because if you ask this question
23.   it may happen that
24.   somebody of us will say no
25.   and then you would get into troubles
26.   even bigger than we would."
27.   And so we made agreement before the screenings started
28.   what questions from the field of economics would be posed.
29.   And then they actually were posed,
30.   we recited our negative opinions about the theories of Šik and similar (reformers)
31.   and without making too big fools of us
32.   we saved our own and our bosses-communists' skins.
33.   Actually, all this was a public secret
34.   and people had already used to speak differently on public and put different faces on
35.   at occasions such as political training and manifestation
36.   than when they spoke to each other face-to-face.

The author of the second extract and its main character is Pavol B. Unlike Miloš A. he was a Party man from 1947 to 1991. He was university teacher.

Pavol's story:

1. During the party screenings in 1970,
2. everyone was interviewed
3. (later on, I myself did such interviews [as member of commission] at the Faculty of economics).
4. The commission
5. that was doing the check-up in my case
6. consisted of three members,
7. two of them were my good mates.
8. One was from the faculty of medicine and the other one from the faculty of law.
9. And they asked me
10. how I see the entry of the (Warsaw pact) military troops, whether it was necessary or not.
11. I said
12. definitely – from their perspective, of course,
13. but I am not quite sure about it, I continued, from our perspective.
14. They said: Pali, go out to the lobby and have a five minute walk,
15. think it over
16. if it was necessary also from our perspective.
17. Indeed, they could not play into my hands better.
18. So I went out and told myself that
19. if I tell that it [the arrival of the "allied" forces] was not necessary
20. then they would expel me from the Party and
21. (I would lose) everything I had been building throughout my life,
22. my position at the Faculty
23. and in the Party organization
24. where I had represented the wing of progress,
25. because there were rather progressive elements as well as elements of retardation in the Party, as elsewhere.
26. So I went back and said (laughter)
27. okay, I have thought it over,
28. it was necessary
29. even from our perspective.
30. They started to guffaw, to laugh,
31. then we hand-shook and that was the end of the story.
32. Well, and later on they asked Ďuro Š.
33. who were the representatives of the right-wing opportunism at the Faculty
34. they asked him to name.
35. And Ďuro refused to name.
36. If they had given me such question
37. I hope I would also have refused to name.
38. Because it was one's character what was at stake here,
39. to harm somebody else,
40. but in my case, it was just about
41. fouling or not fouling my own head a bit.