

Why experts are seen as neutral arbiters in the Czech Republic? Understanding the post-communist politics of de-politicization

Abstract: The situation in contemporary Czech Republic provides numerous examples showing that experts and scientists keep enjoying an unchallenged and privileged status of neutral arbiters, situated out of the political arena. Although comparisons between the post-communist East and (capitalist) West are always at risk of being schematic and inadequate, it seems that such de-politicized perception of science is much stronger in the Eastern Europe than in most Western European countries. Underdevelopment of STS (Science and technology studies) in the post-communist East is part of this diagnosis. Different political cultures of expertise in the “new” and “old” EU member states might even turn into sources of tension and misunderstanding on the level of particular problems and controversies. In my paper I would like to make the difference and its roots more understandable. I will discuss the political status of science under the communist regime and its implications for the development after 1989. That time, in the Czech Republic, science and expertise were to be “finally liberated” from the burden of the political, with the hope that this de-politicization would bring us closer to Western democracies. This was a huge misapprehension, however, since Western democracies were at the very same time shifting towards a kind of “re-politicization” of the realm of science and technology. Propensity toward de-politicization was further increased, again quite paradoxically, by the process of accession of the Czech Republic to the EU. This process, simply put, had the form of purely technical implementation of unquestionable measures and principles. Although my presentation will take empirical evidence and case examples mostly from the Czech Republic, it may open a more general discussion about science and expertise in other post-communist countries as well.

In this paper I would like to highlight what I consider to be one of the most striking, yet often unnoticed difference between the political cultures of Western European countries and the political culture of the Czech Republic. The difference concerns the political status and public perceptions of scientific expertise. Rather than being critical, however, my ambition is to make the difference more understandable. While the situation in the Western Europe has been discussed abundantly, I will try to explain why the situation in Eastern Europe is so dissimilar.

Although the examples I am going to use come almost exclusively from my home country, the Czech Republic, the paper might still have broader implications. Despite undoubted and important differences among the Eastern European countries, both in the present time and in the past, by describing and explaining the situation in the Czech Republic I might address certain common features of the post-communist condition.¹ Further, to a certain extent, the discussion might apply to the Western countries as well – the patterns characteristic of the Czech Republic are in no case completely strange to them; they have only become somewhat obsolete in their strong form.

¹ The fact that it is rather difficult to find analytic accounts of the situation in “science and politics” in various countries in Eastern Europe is illustrative and relevant in itself for our discussions. Indeed, as a Czech sociologist, engaged in STS during last several years and only occasionally going for a short trip abroad, I know much more about “science and politics” in Denmark, France, United Kingdom or Portugal than in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary or even Slovakia.

Treacherous comparisons

Comparisons between the post-communist East and the West of Europe are treacherous. This is especially true when the theme of politics (broadly defined) is concerned. More than fifteen years after the fall of the communist regimes social sciences' thinking on communism and what it meant for the coming decades is still burdened by misunderstandings and schematic conceptions. It is explicitly or implicitly assumed, that East European communism and Western democracies represent two incommensurable worlds. The flourishing discourse of Transformation emphasized the aspects of a radical change and difference, while playing down temporal and spatial continuities.

Let me tell you just two indicative examples:²

Example 1: In a European comparative research project we studied public accountability procedures. Since public accountability was taken as one of the constitutive qualities of democratic political regimes our Western-European colleagues assumed that under communism there were no such things such as public participation, transparency, access to information.³ They could not imagine that something like a public protest was possible during the unremarkable 70s and 80s. But a case study on a household waste incinerator in Prague showed something else. The history of the construction can be traced to 1980s; and so the public controversy over it. Already in 1988 the municipalities of nearby villages started a legal process against the incinerator. They claimed that a better protection against pollutions should be incorporated. Although the construction was a project initiated and approved by the Communist Party organization in Prague, the court decided in favor of the villages. Yet, the construction went on according to old plans and the decision of the court was ignored. The fact that the verdict was ignored cannot be simply interpreted that the events after the decision only revealed the true arrogant nature of the communist regime, because other court decisions about the incinerator in the 1990s, i.e., after the fall of communism, have been ignored as well (not to speak about other case studies gathered by our Western colleagues in their home countries, in which court decisions were at similar occasions violated too). We cannot even easily object that the possibility of appeal was purely formal, which would be revealing the essence of communism, since as most sociologists are aware the tension between formally declared principles and actual behavior is a general feature of social life (and examples of this could again be easily found in many other case studies of our European project).

Example 2: It is often thought that civil society is weak and underdeveloped in post-communist societies and that one of the most burdensome legacies of communism is passivity and even resignation on the part of citizens.⁴ Some observations seem to support the thesis. At least at first sight. Such as when we heard from our French colleague a story about the waste incinerator in Gilly sur Isère (Savoie county, France) (Assouline 2004). Not unlike in Prague, there also was, during 1990s, public resistance towards the incinerator and dioxin pollution was the main issue. However, a striking disparity concerned the level of citizens' involvement. In France it was much higher and richer. During the first few months after establishment of a local civil association the number of

² Both have their origin in my earlier work on a European research project "Analysing public accountability procedures in contemporary European contexts" (2001-2004, HPSE-CT2001-00076).

³ The expectation might have also been supported by a historical overview written for the entire team by Portugal colleagues who constructed their account of the old authoritarian Portuguese political regime in terms of sharp and schematic oppositions.

⁴ Ralf Dahrendorf claimed, already in 1990 that while economic changes and changes of political institutions in Eastern European countries would take months or years, the development of civil society structures could be expected in the prospect of decades (Dahrendorf 1990).

its members increased up to several hundreds. In Prague, however, three local activists had to persuade two their friends to join so that they were five in total and the association could be legally recognized. This civil association, the only local civil association that participated in the controversy, had never had more than five members (the main civil society actors of the controversy came from a nation wide environmental association), until it silently dissolved sometimes in 2000... One could perhaps try to find an explanation of this disproportion by suspecting that the rural environment of a few French mountain valleys was more favorable for social networking and mobilization than the urban area of Prague, inhabited by people living in anonymous neighborhoods of a big city. But the thesis about citizens' passivity in post-communist countries immediately came to the fore. If a careful and patient reader kept reading, however, another shocking detail would appear: in 2001, the company managing the incinerator in Gilly sur Isère did an analysis of air emissions; it turned out that the level of dioxins was 1000 times higher than the allowed standards (Assouline 2004: 4). In Prague, soon after the start of testing operation of the incinerator in 1998, the level of dioxins was pressed down below the European limit. This Czech facility became the first household waste incinerator in the Czech Republic⁵ that keeps the severe European standards.⁶ A new picture begins to emerge. It appears that the French civil association was, above all, to defend the interests of local inhabitants during the legal process that would claim financial compensations.⁷ In the Czech Republic, liability pursuits do not have a tradition. Moreover, given the level of pollution related to the Prague incinerator, there would hardly be any solid ground for such a suit. The aim of the civil association was, in fact, unclear. The members simply struggled against the incinerator and emphasized its threats and limitations. For the nation-wide quasi-professionalized NGO, the leaders of the anti-incinerator coalition, the incinerator was but an instance of a much broader struggle against dioxins and other toxic pollutants. They even did not try to frame the case in such a way that would reflect the perspective of local inhabitants. As soon as it became clear that the incinerator fulfills the criteria of legal regulation and its functioning could not be reverted, they silently left the case and turned their attention elsewhere (Konopasek et al. 2004)... In short, the disparity in terms of the range of public mobilization corresponds with disparate circumstances of these particular cases.

These two examples do not suggest, of course, that there were no differences between the reality of communist regimes and that of Western democracies. Not at all. But in order to understand these differences we should not explain them by simple referring to some essences of totalitarianism (and democracy) or communism (and capitalism). We should not replace careful study of a number of small, ordinary, partial, politically or ideologically unspectacular or even controversial dissimilarities by the rhetoric of two incommensurable realities, so radically disparate that any closer scrutiny of particular differences or similarities is necessarily meaningless.⁸ We need comparative insights sensitive to specific local and historical contexts and suspicious towards big and established notions or categories safely partitioning the helplessly complicated world.

⁵ There are only three household waste incinerators in the Czech Republic – the remaining two are in Liberec and Brno.

⁶ This European limit, 0,1 ng/m³, is roughly ten times lower than the one used in France, where the result was 1285 ng/m³. In relation to the European limit the level of dioxins in the French case was therefore 10.000 times higher. France could be called “incineration” country. It has plenty of incinerators many of which were built already in 1960 and are based on out-of-date technology.

⁷ The scandal had a negative impact on local agriculture, since meat, eggs and cow milk were demonstrably contaminated and could not be sold. Up to 2004 there was only a reasonable suspicion that also human health in the area was affected, but no proofs.

⁸ This position is developed and empirically argued in Konopásek & Kusá (in press).

The specific status of scientific expertise in the Czech Republic

The production of the non-political can be taken as one of the constitutive features of modernity (Turner 1989). Besides bureaucratic administration, science has been an especially influential de-politicising activity. Modern science was shaped, legitimized and perceived as counterpart, indeed as antithesis, of modern politics in many respects. Traditionally, by emphasizing the force of pure facts science takes its credibility from purifying itself from the political. The strength of politics, on the other hand, depends upon the sovereign rule of community of equal voices of fellow-citizens.

However, this setting, presented by Latour (1993) as a “modern constitution”, is now becoming untenable, at least in some contexts. Above all, Latour argues, it is breaking down due to its own success. “Pure science” and “pure politics” have powerfully intervened in different areas of contemporary life. Almost everything has become science-driven or technology-driven. At the same time, almost everything has to be considered in terms of politics nowadays.⁹ As a consequence, the scientific and the political can be found hand in hand in complex imbroglis, inseparably, wherever one looks. The political has become scientific and vice versa. Today, parliaments negotiate about stem cells and genetic modifications and activists mobilize experts on dioxins. Second, and in close relation to the process outlined above, interdisciplinary science studies (e.g. Collins, Pich 1993; Jasanoff et al. 1995; Latour 1998) have developed such theoretical frameworks and methodologies, which make it possible to study, describe, newly understand and perform these complex arrangements. In short, a new reality has emerged hand in hand with our capabilities to see and make sense of it.

The new situation redefines the role of science in contemporary societies as well as the political relevance of science. Science is seen, at least sometimes and by somebody, as part of society (and as part of the problem, and not only as part of the solution). Although it is usual that people expect from experts much more certainty than experts want and are able to provide (e.g., Collins 1997), it is increasingly accepted that expertise acts not only as a source of certainty but also of uncertainty. Lay and local knowledge becomes recognized and appreciated, at least by some, as a background for political action (Scott 1998; Wynne 1996). Actors of civil society increasingly engage in the production of relevant knowledge as well as in decision making. So called “hybrid forums” emerge, in which experts, activists, and politicians collectively shape socio-technical issues (Callon et al. 2001). “A much more interactive role between science experts and lay interpretation” is called for (Bertilsson 2002: 14). Academic autonomy from the state is not emphasized anymore as the main organizing principle of scientific institutions. Democratizing expertise is discussed as a precondition to “improving the quality of policy-making and at the same time securing the trust of the public in European governance” (Liberatore et al. 2001). The limitations of the concept of “public understanding of science” are discussed, especially in relation to so called deficit model, and alternatives are proposed (Elam & Bertilsson 2003).¹⁰

Sure, one should not overvalue these changes. There is always a lot of resistance to them. Moreover, these changes are not observable everywhere with the same intensity. To limit ourselves to the European region, we can see that in countries such as the Czech Republic the

⁹ Ulrich Beck (1997) speaks about the reinvention of the political; feminists about the personal which has become political; and so on.

¹⁰ Under the new condition, when democratic mechanisms extend to the realm traditionally restricted for experts, the old question of the relationship between lay and expert knowledge becomes acute again (e.g., Collins, Evans 2002).

new patterns are almost absent. Indeed, in the light of the situation in the Czech Republic (and most probably in other post-communist countries too), the shift described above looks as a modest, but real achievement.

In my country, science is characteristically not seen as part of the society. On the contrary, it is perceived as something which is and should remain above it. Experts of various kinds are taken as neutral arbiters in quarrels over political issues. The authority of science is generally high and unquestioned. In most of the socio-technical controversies we studied, we could clearly see all this – the range to which political decision making and expert assessment were put strictly against each other, as exclusive paths to solutions, was striking (Konopasek et al, submitted and 2004; but also Stockelova 2001). Let me mention a couple of other illustrative examples that might help to complete the picture:

Example 3: During last presidential elections in the Czech Republic (in early 2003) the political negotiations were painful. Repeated vote in the parliament were unsuccessful. Political parties – pushed both by people’s frustration from politics and by the Czech tradition¹¹ – therefore tried to suggest non-political candidates, among the few of them: the president of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic (the most important research oriented academic institution in the country), the rector of the Charles University in Prague (the most important and oldest teaching oriented academic institution), a university professor and dean of Faculty of Humanities, another university professor and head of the government council for science and research.

Example 4: In December 7, 2004, a seminar entitled “How to deal with science in the media” was organized by civil association Biotrin and the Council for popularization of science of the Academy of Sciences. (The association Biotrin was established by a couple of prominent scientists to promote scientific ideas in the field of biotechnology. Several of its members are also pro-GM oriented members of the governmental advisory committee on GM. Nonetheless, genetic modifications are not a public issue in the Czech Republic; the only visible opponent of GM is Greenpeace and most people think that only experts should decide about GM.) The seminar took place in the building of the Academy of Sciences and according to the minutes from the meeting the participants were: 16 people from the media, 15 scientists and 12 other people interested in popularization of science. The minutes summarize the results of the seminar as follows (I quote the entire last few paragraphs):

Conclusions:

- *People who consume varied food are not threatened by foodstuff*
- *Genetic modifications are modern technology and as any other technology it has both positive and negative aspects. It is the task for scientists to continue their research and search for new possibilities as well as to control current applications and eliminate eventual risks*
- *Research on stem cell is an important and promising field of research, no matter it has its opponents*
- *Nuclear energy has future as a crucial energy resource*

Challenges for scientists:

- *To inform journalists about interesting developments in their research institutes*
- *To popularize their own research results and their own disciplines with no fear*

¹¹ The first and still admired president of Czechoslovakia, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk (president between 1918–1935), was university professor – philosopher and one of the founders of Czech sociology.

- *To suggest interesting topics to journalists*
- *To use well-ordered and unified terminology, which would be understandable and usable for the media*

Challenges for journalists:

- *To act responsibly; only such information that has been verified by scientists or taken over from renowned sources should be hand on to the public*
- *To ask scientists whether they have an interesting theme for popularization*
- *To publish as much information about the state of art of scientific knowledge as possible, but not to raise vain hopes*
- *To consult with respective scientists before publishing an important article on expert issues*

(quoted from: Poznatky a závěry z Workshopu Jak s vědou v médiích [Lessons and conclusions from the Workshop on How to deal with science in the media], Dec. 7, 2004, 3pp.)

I should only add that the seminar was attended by most prominent Czech scientists and was a major event in the field also in terms of participating representatives of the press. (Representatives of both Monsanto Czech Republic and Greenpeace were present.)

The deficit model dominates the relationship between citizens, experts and science-policy makers: citizens are thought as actors whose eventual suspicion towards science and technology should be overcome by education and information campaigns. If problems are framed as expert issues it automatically means that no public involvement is expected.

Politicians, experts and media people typically do not understand the current appeals to democratize science or take them very formally. Considering issues such as public participation in socio-technical controversies is understood as being hostile toward science.¹² Even environmental activists, political aspects par excellence, usually frame socio-technical controversies in a non-political, expert way. In a way, they reproduce the deficit model in a specific variation – it is assumed that the public would be more supportive and receptive toward the agenda of activists if only it would know more and better, in a way experts do. The emphasis on expert framing both allows activists to proceed without substantial public support and prevents them from mobilizing wider publics.¹³ The attractiveness of pure facts and scientific evidence clearly outweighs the value of participation for the political left as well as for the right.¹⁴

Last but not least, and in close relation to what has just been said, in countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, science and technology studies (STS) – in the form that has developed during recent decades in the West – is an underdeveloped, almost non-existent

¹² During the Science in Society Forum last year (9/11 March 2005) in Brussels I talked to a Czech TV journalist participating in the conference. After the session on “Science, Technology and Democracy” she was absolutely horrified by what she perceived as fierce attacks against science.

¹³ Davis (2004) notes the differences between environmentalist movements in the Czech Republic and Western Europe or United States respectively. He highlights that the Czech activists emphasize the non-political nature of their agenda; most of their money come from foreign resources in the form of grants and almost nothing from members’ or sympathizers’ contributions. In comparison membership fees and sympathizers’ donations are important resources for activists in the U.S.

¹⁴ The expert framing of social and economic reforms in Slovakia as well as related lack of interest in consensus-building procedures is discussed by Kusá (2005).

field of study. There are several categories of “science studies” people and/or research programmes (besides my own work and the work of a couple of my students):

- philosophers of science focused around Popper, Kuhn and analytic philosophy;
- a couple of economists or sociologists engaged in mapping the potential of research and development among Czech industrial companies, the willingness and preparedness of academic researchers to participate in industrial research programmes, etc. (some of these projects were initiated as collaborations within European research programmes)
- historians of science (mostly interested in the history of scientific institutions, occasionally in the role of science during the war and some other topics)
- (followers of) former Marxists, originally active in 1960s and reinstated to academic positions after 1989, developing the heritage of Radovan Richta, the author of “Civilization at the Crossroads: Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution” – the book that found some response even in the West (Richta 1969 [1966])
- a group “Women in science”, lead by young feminist researchers and inspired by the EU research programmes.

An analysis of Czech publications and participation in STS conferences would probably confirm that only a few individual researchers somehow reflect current developments in the field of STS.

How to understand the post-communist situation?

The “political culture of expertise” is quite specific in the Czech Republic. The attitude to science as something “above” society and as an unquestioned means of de-politicization, is not only widespread or dominant (which might well be the case elsewhere), but practically hegemonic. There is very low awareness of STS (its perspective and findings) among social scientists and wider public. In short, science is perceived by policy makers, lay citizens, social scientists and scientists themselves differently than is usual in Western Europe. Before complaining about this situation we should try to understand it. In the last section of my paper I will offer several points for discussion.

First, we should realize that post-communist countries have not experienced the key events that have shaken the status of science and scientific expertise in the West. It may look paradoxical at first: communism is often seen as a political regime under which terrible things happened. Well, they did, that is for sure; but in a way the most terrible thing about communism (especially late communism, i.e., the period of state socialist regimes during which the position of science in Western countries began changing) was that “nothing was happening”.¹⁵ And this situation persisted even after 1989. The example of French and Czech cases on household waste incinerators is illustrative here. Indeed, no real disasters related to science and technology took place in the (post)communist block. There has been no HIV epidemic, no contaminated blood scandal, no mass slaughtering in relation to the mad cow disease, no widespread anti-nuclear movement. Sure, there was Chernobyl. There were dying forests because of heavy industry air pollution. But these catastrophes were not seen as failures of experts and new technologies. Rather, they were perceived as fallouts of the

¹⁵ That is also why Vaclav Havel (1989) called the era of late socialism the time of timeless.

political regime. Chernobyl was simply not about risks of nuclear energy; for most people it was very clearly another evidence of the evil associated with communism.¹⁶ Nothing has therefore really shaken the status of scientific knowledge as a neutral force, untouched by dirty politics.

Second, the social sciences were heavily affected by the communist regime. The situation was much worse in the communist Czechoslovakia than, e.g., in Poland or Hungary. There were almost no contacts with sociology in the West – practically no translations, no study trips, no publications abroad. It was an exception if a sociology professor had studied sociology herself or himself. During the periods when sociology was somehow tolerated it was accepted mainly in its depoliticized form – i.e., in the form of standard surveys and technically presented statistics. Sociological theory was reduced to Marxism-Leninism.¹⁷ Interpretive approaches, constructivism, qualitative methods, historical sociology, case studies and the like could have only a highly marginal position.¹⁸ To the extent the expansion of contemporary STS was related to these forms of sociological inquiry the state of art of sociology in (post)communist Czechoslovakia was unfavorable for development of an STS imagination.

Third, natural sciences were regarded, under the communist regime, as a *relative* refuge from politics. Natural science disciplines were among the few areas somehow resistive to communist ideology. Many people who would otherwise be intellectuals, studied nuclear physics or mathematics simply because they were not allowed to study philosophy or social science. Alternatively, such people did not see a point in studying Marxist-Leninist philosophy or social science. Further, if somebody was to be fired out of an academic job because of political reasons, it was more often, easy and urgent if it was a position in humanities or social science than if it was in physics or medicine. But still, even the sciences and scientific institutions were deeply penetrated by the communist politics.¹⁹ There were five-year research plans, Party's undertakings, institutional hierarchies derived from the Communist Party membership and so on. The change of the regime in 1989 was perceived as a long awaited and desired freeing of natural sciences, totally and definitely, from politics. It was naturally expected that now, finally, the sciences would become a completely non-political exercise. This liberation was seen as part of our moving toward the Western Europe: the (natural) sciences were going to be as non-political and pure as in the capitalist West, people thought. What a paradox, of course. Roughly at the same time another, quite different view was being applied in the West, i.e., that science cannot really be divorced from politics. Bruno Latour had already provocatively called sciences as a continuation of politics with different means (Latour 1983: 168) and the new view of scientific practice emphasized that the boundaries between science and politics are blurred, shifting and always in the making (not taken-for-granted). In other words, at the time when science was becoming “part of society” in the West, it was being ultimately divorced from society and de-politicised in post-communist countries, while believing that this was the way how to become more (Western)

¹⁶ The resistance toward nuclear energy has never been substantial, even after 1989. Even today the public support of nuclear program is rather high. The Czech Green Party succeeded to get into parliament during recent elections only thanks to weakening their anti-nuclear rhetoric.

¹⁷ After all, the exact name of sociology programs in 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovak universities was “Marxist-Leninist sociology”.

¹⁸ In 1980, (articles on) interpretive approaches were published mainly in a Czech samizdat (typewritten and illegal) sociological journal called *Sociologický obzor* (Sociological Horizon). Somewhat better situation was in Slovakia.

¹⁹ Basic organizations of the Communist Party were located at workplaces. The spheres of work and political surveillance were closely related.

European... This mismatch is still very much a point of misunderstanding and one of the main reasons why people in my country unsuccessfully struggle with the idea of “democratizing expertise”.

Fourthly and lastly, the post-1989 developments substantially contributed to the general drift towards de-politicization. Some legal experts we interview for our research on public accountability mentioned an interesting thing related to the process of accession to the EU: adopting rules by means (or with the help) of a simple reference to European standards implies avoiding or neutralizing true political discussions on the implication and political meaning of these rules. In fact, such a practice is counterproductive in terms of cultivation of the political dimension of the entire accession process.

On one hand, integration into EU often meant introduction and formal acceptance of more inclusive, participatory politics. Citizens started to be taken more seriously as active participants in democratic decision making. On the other hand, in practice, the accession procedure itself brought about “mechanization” and “neutralization” of political processes. Political debates were dominated by a discourse of necessity. Candidate countries were measured and compared like participants in a race. Eventual failure in the race was said to have fatal consequences. The legislative process was penetrated by a battery of deadlines, schedules, and conditions. A huge amount of new legislation was approved without due political negotiation and public discussion, solely on the basis of adoption of given European norms, principles and standards.

Example 5: During the accession process the Czech government attempted to introduce a constitutional law that would make adoption of European legislation less time-consuming and smoother. The government itself was to be entitled to release directives with the force of law aiming at harmonization with the European law. The proposal was explicitly justified by the following words: “Given the practically non-existent space for changes of implemented directions and guidelines of EU in the parliament, the Government considers as humiliating to even submit such proposals to the members of parliament who simply cannot think of modifying them.” (Vajdová 2004)

It was only paradoxical that among the norms adopted “technically” and without due political process were the norms related to democratization of policy making.

The prime role in the accession process was played by “implementation expertise”, focused on smooth achieving of selected indicators and supporting the harmonization process. The emphasis (at least formally) was on objective and neutral informing citizens about the EU, instead of persuading them. Public opinion polls confirmed that the Czech citizens wanted it that way: just pure information. Those who argued that a political debate was missing were regularly classified as enemies of European integration. In short, the accession to the EU (with all its emphasis on inclusive and participatory political procedures) occurred in a strangely depoliticised way, in which science and expertise played the role of neutral, technical devices.

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