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Confronting Cold War Conformity Peace and Protest Cultures in Europe, 1945-1989

Summer School at the Charles University Prague

August 18 – 25, 2008

with the support of the European Union

Conveners: Martin Klimke (HCA Heidelberg), Joachim Scharloth (University of Zurich), Kathrin Fahlenbrach (University of Halle), Milos Havelka, Michal Pullmann, Zdenek Nebrensky, (Charles-University in Prague)

Jointly organized by the Charles University Prague & Heidelberg Center for American Studies

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The Czech and formerly Czechoslovak capital city of Prague was the site of this year's conference of the European Union-funded Marie Curie research network "European Protest Movements since 1945." Prague was an obvious choice for hosting the annual meeting for this group, which has emerged as the major cross-disciplinary platform for the study of protest movements in postwar Europe. After all, both the "Prague Spring" of 1968 and Velvet Revolution of 1989 had their central localities in Prague's Charles Square. Today, these historical events are thoroughly embedded in the European memorial landscape. Images of Prague citizens demonstrating in front of Red Army tanks in late August of 1968 have acquired iconic status in many European contexts. From coast to coast, similar commemorative footage was broadcast this summer. "Prague '68" images are being reproduced in schoolbooks all across Europe. The highly celebrated intellectual protagonists (as well as historic antagonists) of both events, Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel, are towering European emblems of the "struggle of man against power" (Kundera).

The choice of Prague in August 2008 was auspicious not only in terms of location, but also with respect to timing. While conference participants discussed the history of European protest movements in the halls of the venerable Charles University (the oldest of central Europe), current events at times almost seemed like a running commentary on the past. Even as conference participants discussed the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 21, 1968, Russian troops were on the march in Georgia. While some quickly drew parallels to events 40 years earlier, contemporary Prague dissidents had different lessons to offer. Although the Polish government had initially been reluctant to support American efforts to build a NATO missile defense system, it had agreed to do so, with plans calling for a radar facility in the Czech Republic. Protestors built a human chain stretching from Charles Square to the Czech foreign ministry to fight off an impending American invasion (albeit a rather limited one in the guise of a few specialists manning the radar stations). Street activists clad in German Wehrmacht, Soviet Red Army, and U.S. military uniforms stomped on a map of the Czech Republic that had been drawn on the pavement of Charles Square.

The conference was organized by Kathrin Fahlenbrach (University of Halle-Wittenberg), Martin Klimke (Heidelberg Center for American Studies, and German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.), and Joachim Scharloth (University of Zurich) in cooperation with Milos Havelka, Michal Pullmann, and Zdenek Nebrensky (all Charles University Prague). It boasted a whopping 80 papers presented in 7 plenary meetings, a stunning 21 panels running in 3 parallel sessions, as well as 8 workshops, to which all the participants were asked to contribute. It would be intellectually dishonest to reduce this multi-national, multidisciplinary, week-long fair of the “state of the art” to a few general points. Still, six major impulses from this scholarly Prague summer festival can be discerned:

- First, social protest research has broken out of its former niche existence. It is now thoroughly tied to general postwar social, cultural, and political histories. In other words, social movement research has gone mainstream.
- Second, the study of the transnational diffusion of alternative lifestyles, cultural practices, and movement tactics is now *de rigueur*. So commonsensical has the “transnational nature of protest” become that one wonders whether research will soon take a “national” or “regional” turn. In fact, several papers argued for more attention to the local or the parochial.
- Third, research on Cold War protest is increasingly being cast in *longue durée* perspectives. Longer trajectories are being identified, stretching back to the first half of the 20th century and reaching beyond the 1989 threshold. Studies on cyberprotest, anti-globalization, or even jihad open up interesting avenues for historical synthesis, for social scientific theorizing, and for cross-cultural comparison.

- Fourth, the field of historical social movement research is now broader. Social movements are no longer defined as being driven by “progressive” or “left-wing” agendas (although many papers were devoted to movements that categorized themselves as such). Fascist, ethnic, or religiously motivated protest has gained a prominent place. This allows for new comparative and theoretical insights.
- Fifth, writing good cultural histories of protest remains an uphill battle. Although innovative questions are constantly being asked, empirically convincing answers are still in short supply. Thus the “cultural turn,” even though it has lost its former edge, still has a long way to go.
- Finally, while protest is still being analyzed from discernible disciplinary angles (and will remain so for the foreseeable future), the conference worked remarkably well with respect to cross-disciplinary interaction. With historians now routinely examining symbolic practices or performative acts, the boundaries between history, media, and literary studies have become blurred. On the other hand, historians’ dialogue with the more and more quantitative social sciences have come to a screeching halt.

The conference opened on a somber note that looked back to “1968.” The question of what “Prague ‘68” had in common with contemporary events in the West took center stage during the opening ceremony in the adorned Patriotic Room of the Charles University. Petr Pithart, Vice Chairman of the Senate of the Czech Republic and himself a former participant of both the 1968 and 1989 uprisings, painted a melancholy picture of the late 1960s “as a dim yet beautiful dream.” Although Prague protesters barely took notice of what was happening all around (in Vietnam, Paris, even neighboring Berlin, Vienna, and Warsaw), for a moment they could believe that Prague was the epicenter of world history. Invoking Milan Kundera’s assertion that “the Paris May was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism while the Prague Spring was an explosion of revolutionary skepticism,” Pithart saw the Czech 1960s as a (mostly unacknowledged) longing to return to the halcyon days of the interwar period. He concluded, however, that all the 1968 movements in East and West shared a utopian dreaminess that later movements would not replicate. This was especially true, Pithart concluded, for the “realistic” 1989, whose main Czech protagonists famously rejected the legacies of ‘68: “Perhaps even the skeptics would still agree with the lyrics that the sixties and their culmination in 1968 were the time of hope that would never come back.”

The opening keynote lecture took participants to familiar territory. Luisa Passerini’s (Turin University) talk on “Memory and Utopia: Intersubjectivity in European Protest Movements, 1960-1980” stressed the novel character of the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s because of the emergence of new actors such as women and minority groups. The other seven thematic lectures, which structured the program during the following six days, also were stock-taking exercises. Ruth Kinna (Loughborough University) went back to the early 20th century, when avant-garde artists and thinkers, on the one hand, and anarchist

movements, on the other, were exploring the tension between theory and social practice that would beset later movements as well. Sven Reichardt (University of Constance) explained why it makes sense to analyze European fascism with models developed for social movement research. Thomas McDonough (Binghamton University) explored radical architectural agendas in postwar Europe that were close to trailblazing intellectual groupings such as the Situationist International.

The keynote lectures on the three following days by Lawrence Wittner (SUNY Albany), Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey (University of Bielefeld), and Frank Zelko (University of Vermont) mapped postwar territories, and Jenny Pickerill (University of Leicester) took the conference into the new world of internet-based protest. Wittner explained the historically unprecedented rise of large-scale peace movements in the postwar period with three factors: a) the sheer destructiveness of modern warfare; b) the existence of political alternatives to war (such as the United Nations) as a means of international conflict resolution; and c) the democratization of the public sphere, which was disproportionately a middle-class phenomenon. Gilcher-Holtey maintained that even though Hans-Magnus Enzensberger and others were later quite critical of the utopian overshooting of the 1968 movements, the cognitive revolution that had been started by the 1960s avant-garde quite thoroughly transformed (Western) modernity, which took on a more self-reflective stance. Zelko presented his findings on the rise of environmental protest and Greenpeace in West Germany. He stressed the interaction between movements and high modernist state intervention schemes as “instrumental in giving rise to new forms of direct action.” Pickerill, finally, picked up on the theme of environmental protest and demonstrated how different technologies shape the expression of dissent in transnational as well as in national contexts.

The twenty-one individual panels and workshops were organized around specific themes, which mostly transcended chronological and national, as well as disciplinary, boundaries. They included but were not limited to urban fashion, spaces, music, cyberprotest, gender, protest techniques, transnational protest, violence, terrorism, and youth cultures. Most panels easily transcended the old Cold War borders, even though most individual papers were structured along national lines.

As anyone who has been at recent European humanities conferences knows, some of the most intriguing new research is streaming out of formerly Eastern bloc countries, or coming from the long neglected old Southern European “fringe.” Formerly Western European countries such as Britain (with the exception of Northern Ireland), France, and West Germany were less prominently represented in Prague than at other recent “1968” events. Anna Pelka (Oviedo) stressed the role of Western models in the formation of a Polish youth clothing style during the 1960s and 1970s, which soon acquired its own specific meaning. Agnes Aljas (Tartu) studied the formation of countercultural discussions in 1960s Estonia, Olga Gurova (St. Petersburg) looked at the discussion of consumption and fashion in 1970s Soviet magazines, and Michal Kwiecien (Chicago) explored the continuities in anti-homosexual policies in pre- and post-1989 Poland.

Several papers studied how memories of earlier protest movements have helped shape recent history. Hannes Lachmann (Prague) demonstrated how the Czechoslovak protests of 1968 were entangled in the memories of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Bogdan Trifunovic (Cacak) made a similar case with respect to Yugoslavia. Andrea Mariuzzo (Pisa) placed recent protests against the War in Iraq in the context of the long struggle over peace and nuclear disarmament in Italy, Anne Joly (Nanterre) discussed the role of anti-fascism in the post-1989 German radical left, and Chris Reynolds (Nottingham) took up memories of 1968 in the case of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights struggle.

Right-wing, religious, and ethnic protest attracted a great deal of attention. Rene Karpantschhof (Copenhagen) used an interactive model to explain the emergence of the Danish racist right wing and its defeat when the establishment was brought in. Sara Margaryan (Lund) looked at memories of the 1915 Armenian genocide in recent social movements in Armenia; Alexander Clarkson (London) argued that immigrant political violence can only be successfully analyzed if one accounts for the social complexity of the communities in question; and Vera Eccarius-Kelly (Loudonville) examined the Kurdish immigrant community's transformation into a major player in current European protest. Chares Demetriou (Florence) compared political violence and postcolonial freedom struggles in Cyprus and Northern Ireland.

Several papers made specific points about modes of transnational interaction. Valentine Lomellini (Lucca) studied the repercussions of the Soviet invasion in Prague among Western European communist parties. Lynn Owens (Middlebury) looked at the politics of travel and location (space was an important component in many panels) in a paper on the Amsterdam squatters' movement and its impact abroad. Karolina Pietras (Paris) studied Western perceptions of Solidarity, Quinn Slobodian (New York) the impact of Third-Worldism on the West German student movement, and Fabienne Tissot (Zurich) the construction of a global youth protest language.

On the last day, the conference returned to local Prague events 40 and 20 years ago (which also had been the focus of a well-attended public eyewitness panel moderated by Milos Havelka on Friday night with former Czech 68ers Jri Kosta, Jaroslav Sabata, and Milos Barta at the podium). In revisiting the famous exchange between Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel, Milos Havelka (Prague) explained the events in 1968 with a generational model. Kundera, who had come of age during World War II and thus had experienced communism as a liberating force, defended the "Czech Deal" of reform communism against the critique of young intellectuals like Vaclav Havel, who had come of age during Stalinist rule. The skeptic Havel thought Kundera's praise of the Czech people's uprising historically obsolete. These different generational ideas about the capacity of Czech society to reform itself had significant long-term repercussions. In 1989, few still saw reform communism as a viable model, as Michal Pullmann explained in his lecture on the "Dynamics of Perestroika in Czechoslovakia." With the "normalization" (a contemporary euphemism for Communist suppression) of the late 1960s and early 1970s,

ideas of a “third way,” which had been a prominent theme of the 1968s in East and West, seemed to have been buried by the events themselves.

In short, the summer school was both an impressive demonstration of the vitality of protest movement research and a vibrant network that by now has more than 250 affiliates from more than 30 countries and numerous disciplines.¹ The network, which is housed by the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA) at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, continues to produce companion volumes, online guides, and reference books,² has just launched its own publication series (“Protest, Culture and Society” at Berghahn Books, New York/Oxford), and will thus certainly have a significant impact on how we interpret postwar European protest movements in the future.

For further information, conference proceedings, and a complete program of the summer school please visit www.protest-research.eu (Events/Summer School).

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¹ See <http://www.protest-research.eu>.

² Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds., 1968. Ein Handbuch zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2007 / Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008); Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds., 1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-77 (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), online guide at <http://www.1968ineurope.com>; Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds., Protest Cultures: A Companion, Vol. 1: Pragmatics of Protest (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, forthcoming 2009).