Socialist Modernity in the Northern Bohemia

Matěj Spurný, Most do budoucnosti: Laboratoř socialistické modernity na severu Čech [A Bridge to the Future. A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Northern Bohemia], Praha: Charles University — Karolinum, 2016, 287 pp.

The story of the towns of Most, the old town whose fate was sealed by rich deposits of brown coal beneath its surface, and the new one built on a 'green' field, is also called by Matěj Spurný an experiment in the application of the paradigm of the scientific and technical revolution and its repercussions. The author creates a sophisticated image of a dead town's autopsy (archaeological, civil-historical, ethnographic or sociological research conducted in the ghost town since the 1960s), and at the same time a laboratory, not only of modernity but also in the sense of an artistic reflection of condemned urbanism. This may imply the fact that more such stories have unfolded on a small scale. But, this is not just a question of demolition of a single settlement that kept alive the memory of several generations. With this story, Spurný aims to show the transformation of the legitimacy of state socialism from the 1940s until the end of the 1980s, i.e. the stability and the renewed consensus, and where the erosion of the system originated and of what it consisted.

Taken out of context, it would be more of a study of regional history. One of the many strengths of the book, which the author calls with an unnecessary modesty, is an international comparison, and not only in economic, urban, environmental questions, and the approach to the protection of the historical and cultural heritage. Another seemingly obvious matter is the careful and inconceivable demonstration of the context of the history (and the presence) of European thought since the Enlightenment, despite the critical social modernity of the 19th century, the belief in progress and the possibilities of science and the disillusion of the 1960s, which may, however, result in an as yet unconfirmed more responsible relation to the environment, the sources and the past, beyond which, as is clearly evident from the story of Most, no clean break with the past can be made.

Matěj Spurný tells one story on many planes, which are related to each other in a tight interleaving, and it is another of the strenghts of the book that he built in a disciplined and thoughtful manner the structure of this story without avoiding the persistent stereotypes which he critically explored (or revalued and in some cases elucidated).

The fact is that old Most was demolished to make room for mining. Technological progress and the possibility of using the resources in the era of state socialism made this happen in a relatively short period of time, during which the old town was all but demolished and the new town built. The astounding mobilisation of the workforce and resources would have hardly been feasible, to such an extent, in the past and under another political system. If we ask about specific participants, the emphasis is placed on the system in the book and on the methods of decision-making at the central level, following both the party and the state line, and their interrelationships; the negotiation modalities are also documented on lower levels: local, district

and regional. The participants, be they institutions or individuals engaged in them, show — contrary to the persistent general awareness — a considerable degree of continual discourse where the only things to change are the strategies with which the goals are achieved.

As early as, in the opening section entitled 'Story', it is pointed out that the fate of the town was not due to the technocratic approach of the engineering and economic elite of the mining company Severočeské hnědouhelné doly and the ruling structures; on the contrary. From the end of the 19th century it must have been known that under the original town of Most, there laid a very rich deposit of relatively good quality brown coal; later it was proven that this deposit was larger than the overburden that lies above it. Deep mining in the town had to stop at the beginning of the 20th century as the overburden had become very unstable and some serious accidents happened. Large-scale exploitation began to develop during the First World War, again going hand in hand with technological advances, allowing for the development of open-cast mining, a method which is much more effective, but irredeemably devastating.

The town of Most was part of the borderland called Sudetenland, an alienated landscape to which Matěj Spurný added another meaning and, at the same time, revised this idea. It was not an area with a homogeneous German-speaking population; especially the lower social classes of miners constituting the necessary workforce spoke Czech. Most was still a place of memory after 1945 not only for the displaced Germans, but especially for the Czechs who returned after the war. It was based on the collectively perceived gross social injustice concetised in the tragic events of 1932. It was not necessary to construct this symbol in a complex fashion under the new Communist regime after 1948: its significance was confirmed, described and historically explored. Logically, it subsequently served as a further argument to reconcile the promised and accomplished goals of state socialism, namely a fair settlement of social relations and a fair redistribution with one of the strong motives being human dignity.

At the heart of the story is the town neglected for decades, both in terms of the infrastructure and housing investment. The reason was obvious: with the coal supply the repairs and alterations were no longer profitable or sensible. This was confirmed at the turn of the 1960s when it was finally decided to demolish the old town. Matěj Spurný shows that no direct route led to this decision. He points out, in particular, the early rejection of the plans (in the 1950s) by the local structures, in particular the 'municipal national committee' (town council). The identification of the population, not all of whom were post-war settlers, with the demolition of the city was determined by its identification with the vision of dignified, comfortable living with functioning networks, sewerage and infrastructure. This urban utopia, originating from modern utopias and flexibly using Marxist-Leninist ideology, was part of the discourse of the scientific and technological revolution, technocracy, productiveness, care from which there was no escape, but also a vision of landscape reconstruction, even though this aspect was stronger and more specifically represented with the construction of the new town. The change of consensus is related to the way in which aspects of ecological criticism and criticism of access to the

countryside and historical heritage entered their awareness (experienced in this region first-hand).

It is clear from the text that the local residents were not always carriers of critical discourse, at least until the 1980s, when devastation of the landscape exceeded any comparable standards and, to use the title of a book by Miroslav Vaněk, one could not breathe there, let alone live a dignified life. State socialism, using its own means in carrying out the Most experiment, was undermining its legitimacy from the 1980s with its inability to solve the catastrophic living conditions that could not be improved by any extra compensations. This was despite the fact that in the 1970s it was able to build on the critical potential of the reformist 1960s and meet the criticism levelled at the all-out exploitation — and to draw from it usable consequences.

If we go beyond the specific story of the towns and their inhabitants and shift our attention to the historical context, the most valuable aspect of Matěj Spurný's book is the contextualisation of the Most experiment, an example of the explanation of the dominant and peripheral discourses. The black and white narrative, used in today's assessment of the irreplaceable loss of one of the most precious places in this country, is reflected by Spurný, but he rejects it and persuasively refutes its one-sided flatness by explaining it with the continual thinking world, the consensus achieved or accepted by the inhabitants. Moving from a locally-dictatorial way of managing in place during the 1950s to a managerial technocratic and bureaucratic professional management, which, however, ceased to be able to cope with the problems it created itself; in other words, when describing the transition from Stalinism to reformist socialism and the normalisation and concrete transformation of the related world of thought, Spurný not only in illustrating but also in contextualising. He points to the elegance with which the elites managed (in the 1970s) seemingly impossible: to connect the increasingly ruthless (as a result of technological development) exploitation with the consciousness of the protection of the historical heritage and the technical / technological advancement of the state, demonstrated especially by the deliberately publicised preservation of the Gothic church, which is a real paradox. Spurný also successfully uses the concepts of reflexive modernity of Ulrich Beck, the world of thought (Sinnwelt) and, of course, methods of environmental and urbanistic studies, linking these disciplines and approaches with socio-historical ones. He does not avoid overlaps to the present: from the point of view of the population, especially the 'solution' to the Roma issue in the Most region, the construction of the housing estate at Chánov, which is one of the examples of the technocratic thinking of the elites, where they expose their limitations the way the huge coal deposit is limited.

The Most story shows why state socialism was strong, in what it was weak, how it came to terms with legitimation claims, how it gained or lost consensus, and infers why it came to an end, even though it was by no means endowed with this in its victory after Second World War. However, the story of a particular city is not complete and, on the contrary, the end is still unknown. In the preponderant public space, no constant attention is paid to it, but in addition to the social problems of the whole area or in the context of the discussion of the breaking of the mining limits and the associated continuing destruction, it is possible to see the continuing interest in this

scarred region to this day, even in the majority culture.[1] As the conclusion of Matěj Spurný's book shows, the present offers again, surprisingly, a continuous discourse of exploitation, though anchored differently. In other words: in purely economic interests which find support in the places where decisions are made. It is good to keep this always in mind.

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1 Here we refer to a successful adaptation of the Czech Television and its partners, The World Under the Head (2016, scenario Ondřej Štindl, art direction Tomáš Feřtek, direction Marek Najbrt and Radim Špaček), where the exploited landscape is one of the leading actors in the story, taking place in parallel in the 1980s century and in the present.