

# Theoretical Approaches to Public Spaces and their Relevance to an Interpretation of the Czech Student Movement in 1989



Lucie Cviklová

## KEY WORDS:

Czechoslovakia — Velvet Revolution — Normalization — Student Movement — Public Spaces — Social Theory

## INTRODUCTION

While analyzing three theoretical frameworks of public spaces, the article highlights relevant aspects of the participation of the current Czech elites in the Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia in 1989.<sup>1</sup> The presentation of empirical data from interviews with the current Czech elites, who used to be striking students, focused on the activities of students and teachers in the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, as well as on their personal interpretation of a sudden renewal of various parallel public spaces, characteristic of democratic societies.

The unique forms of concerted action, and the emergence of horizontal public domains, occurred not only in consequence of students' and teachers' efforts, but also thanks to the interest of counter-elites that under the conditions of the totalitarian regime had been barred from practicing their professions, and in November 1989 made the decision to join the umbrella grouping *Občanské Fórum* (Civic Forum). Czech researchers, specifically oral historians, have collected a wealth of information about the course of the national elites' mobilization against the last stage of the Czechoslovak post-totalitarian regime.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been paid to a theoretical explanation of the November protestations, as well as to an elucidation of participation of elites in the genealogy and the temporary existence of the alternative public realms.

Dozens of interviews with members of the current elites have revealed that the emergence of liberated public spaces in the Faculty of Arts of Charles University was set in motion by discontented students and later assisted by activists from diverse informal networks as well as ordinary citizens. In November and December 1989,

---

1 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, Routledge 1992. See esp. Chapter 3, *Models of Public Space*, pp. 89–120.

2 For more details see: Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Urbášek, *Vítězové? Poražení? [Winners? Losers?]*, *The Political Dissent and Elite during Normalization. A Biographical Interview*, Prague 2005.



various social groups showed their interest in interacting with the striking students and sparked off fruitful informal debates combining generational, political, and professional perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

Employing distinct conceptualizations of ‘private sphere’, ‘public sphere’ and ‘concerted action’, the article aims to include the role of the current elites, who used to be striking students during the Velvet Revolution, in the Czech collective memory.<sup>4</sup> To put it more precisely, it aims to clarify current cultural elites’ involvement in the Velvet Revolution in the Faculty of Arts of Charles University through several theoretical perspectives: (1) Jürgen Habermas’ conception of the ideal public space and the importance of the educational component, (2) Hannah Arendt’s agonistic approach to the public realm and her understanding of action, (3) Seyla Benhabib’s conception of deliberative democracy and feminism. The explanatory force of the theoretical frameworks is illustrated by excerpts from the interviews with male and female participants and eyewitnesses — former students in various fields of study in the Faculty of Arts in November 1989. The selection of information from interviews highlighted items such as involvement in students’ activism several months before the Velvet Revolution, experiences with police intervention in the demonstration on 17 November 1989, being on strike committees and in *ad hoc* constituted departments at the faculty level, personal memories of diverse public speeches, or revolutionary actions outside the university such as agitation.

In the last decades of recent history, construction of collective memory regarding the participation of the current elites in the collapse of the former Czechoslovak communist regime focused on the description and explanation of the course of the Velvet Revolution; i.e. a non-violent transfer of power going on from 17 November to 29 December 1989. The diverse forms of collective mobilization were not limited to the specific segments of elites and intellectual circles at Czech universities, but also aimed at the inclusion of broader social forces for the purpose of dismantling the government and the political regime.<sup>5</sup>

---

3 For more details see: Milan Otáhal and Miroslav Vaněk, *Sto studentských revolucí: Studenti v období pádu komunismu — životopisná vyprávění*, [A Hundred Student Revolutions: Students at the Time of the Fall of the Communist Regime — Biographical Narratives], Prague 1999.

4 For more details see: Josef Petráň, *Filozofové dělají revoluci: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy během komunistického experimentu (1948–1968–1989)* [Philosophers Are Making a Revolution: Faculty of Arts (Charles University) during a Communist Experiment (1948–1968–1989)], Prague 2015.

5 Cf. Monika MacDonagh-Pajerová, *Vezměte s sebou květinu: deníky a vzpomínky z let 1980–1990* [Take a Flower with You: Diaries and Reminiscences of Years 1980–1990], Prague 2014, p. 254.

**EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH THE FORMER STRIKING STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS FROM ARENDT'S PERSPECTIVE ON CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE**



Hannah Arendt presented her gender blind perspective on political life, an ideal form of public sphere and the concept of action in her famous book *The Human Condition/ Vita Activa*, where she presented the thesis that action is the most important characteristic of the human condition and the highest category of the tripartite division between the human activities (labour, work, action).<sup>6</sup> *The Human Condition/ Vita Activa* is considered to be one of the most influential contributions to political philosophy due to Arendt's original thesis about the importance of a specific configuration between the significance of political action and power.<sup>7</sup> According to her, an ideal public space is constituted by political action and presupposes stable boundaries between private life (*oikos*) and public sphere (*polis*); political action results from communicative power and entails a risk.<sup>8</sup>

I saw that many students were beaten up. They dragged me, pushed me inside a police car, put me in, and took me away. In the car I wondered where we were going, but I could not look out of the windows. I had had some experience of an arrest related to previous protestations and common police practices. The car would stop in the middle of a forest; we were then beaten, and later released. This time was different. The car went for a relatively long time and I thought they were taking us either to Ruzyně prison or to some forest outside of Prague. In the end, we got out of the car somewhere in the city, in front of a large building, and I did not know where we were. They brought us into a big room; they took all our belongings away from us, searched all our pockets and made us wait there for hours. During the night they called us for interrogation, which was standard police procedure, and they took our identity cards. They did not resort to any violence and they only threatened me and other students with expulsion from the university. We were all surprised when, at dawn, they gave us our belongings back and let us go... (Interview with a former male student and a current member of the European administrative elite, April 2015)

Furthermore, political action has been determined by self-disclosure and self-renewal of the actors through the medium of speech as well as by natality.<sup>9</sup> Arendt introduced the notion in her dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine* and elaborated it with

---

6 Cf. Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, London 1974, pp. 55–60.

7 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power*, *Social Research*, 44/1, 1977, pp. 3–24.

8 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958. See esp. Chapter 2, *The Private and the Public Realm*, pp. 22–37.

9 Cf. Jeffrey Champlin, *Born Again: Arendt's 'Natality' as Figure and Concept*, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 88/2, 2013, pp. 150–164.



expressions such as ‘miracle of beginning’, ‘change in the state of affairs’, arrival of new elements, etc.

In 1989 I was a regular student of ancient Greek and Latin in the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. I recall that from 1988 to 1989 I was abroad, and I know that I definitively returned at the end of May or in June 1989. After my arrival I enjoyed the summer holiday and I did not know anything about student protestations or any other goings-on in the Faculty of Arts. Nevertheless, as far as I remember I participated in several anti-government protests; for example, in August 1989 I managed to take part in the annual demonstration on the occasion of protests against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The demonstration failed to meet my expectations since the number of participants in the protest was very small: in Wenceslas Square I only saw several bunches of people. In the late summer of 1989, I was also surprised by a refugee crisis that had been triggered by a Hungarian decision to take down the barbed wire on its border with Austria. A growing number of East Germans, dissatisfied with the lack of reform in their country and reluctant to smuggle themselves into Austria, started seeking refuge at the West German Embassy in Budapest and then in Prague...

(Interview with a former male student and a current member of the European administrative elite, April 2015)

Arendt was convinced that Greek *polis* was the empirical example of an ideal public space where citizens, unequal by nature, were constructed as politically equal, and she described the participants in *polis* with such expressions as ‘men of action’ and ‘seekers of adventure’.<sup>10</sup> Arendt’s understanding of public sphere has been appreciated as well as criticized by specialists in various disciplines of social science such as Andrew Arato, Jean Cohen, Agnes Heller, and other scholars.<sup>11</sup> For example, current influential Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe has been critical of conceptualization of pluralism by distinct streams of liberal thought, and has appreciated Arendt’s idea of the spontaneous constitution of the common world by the choice between the two or more alternative scenarios. Arendt illustrated her optimistic vision of public action in the ancient world with phrases such as ‘continuous beginning’ or ‘virtue of being born’ and set it in the context of her negative evaluation of labour and work activities; while labour consisted of endless and repetitive service to biological necessity, work reposed on domination and transformation of nature. Furthermore, she argued against positive aspects of modernity and associated it with the loss of the common world, the eclipse of tradition and authority, the emergence of mass society, the bureaucratic administration and totalitarianism...

10 Cf. David Marshall, *The Polis and Its Analogues in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, *Modern Intellectual History*, 7/1, 2010, pp. 123–149.

11 Cf. Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge 1994, See esp. Chapter 4, *The Normative Critique: Hannah Arendt*, pp. 177–200.

I come from Louny and in 1986 I passed entrance examinations for the Faculty of Arts, specialization in Czech and English studies. I think that my perspectives were also influenced by my everyday life at a student dormitory. I was not in contact with contributors to the journal *Situace* [Situation] but I used to read and write for the student periodical *Ústřety* [Responsiveness]. I believe that all students who used to study Czech and English studies had similar preferences. To put it more specifically, they liked English studies and had negative attitude to Czech studies. In the department of Czech studies everybody preferred and liked the lecturers V.M. and P.B. V.M. was a specialist in Czech and Slovak literature and translated literary works from Czech and Slovak; P.B. was a literary critic, historian, philologist and translator of professional literature from English. I believe that the majority of students in the Faculty of Arts were sceptical about their future career plans and hardly dreamt of any social change...

(Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, June 2016)

According to Hannah Arendt, the emergence of totalitarian movements and later stabilization of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Germany resulted in an array of negative phenomena such as liquidation of meaningful public structures, mass terror and surveillance of citizens by secret services.<sup>12</sup> These ideas can be found in her post-war publication *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that was recognized by the international scientific community; Hannah Arendt is considered to be one of the most important contributors to the theoretical frameworks of nondemocratic regimes and ranked among the specialists in the field such as Andrew Arato, Raymond Aron, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carl Joachim Friedrich, Claude Lefort, Juan José Linz, Richard Löwenthal, Franz Leopold Neumann, Giovanni Sartori, Alfred Stepan, and dozens of others.<sup>13</sup>

According to Hannah Arendt, one should also look at the impact of totalitarianism from the point of view of elimination of privacy as a personal space, as the right to be alone and as a dimension of freedom. More concretely, privacy of citizens under the former East and Central European totalitarian regimes was violated by the absence of rule of law and namely by the subversive activities of security services such as arbitrary house searches in the name of 'ferreting out secret enemies' and 'looking for former political opponents.'<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in all East and Central European countries the totalitarian governments imitated the Soviet model of the communist institutionalization and there was an extensive mobilization of citizens in a host of organizations for children and adults; for example in the former Czechoslovakia, *Svaz pro spolupráci s armádou* [Union for Cooperation with the Army] corresponded to

12 Cf. Richard Bernstein, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: Not History, but Politics*, *Social Research*, 69/2, 2002, pp. 381-401.

13 Cf. Andrew Arato, *Dictatorship Before and After Totalitarianism*, *Social Research*, 69/2, 2002, 473-503.

14 Cf. Roy Tsao, *The Three Phases of Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism*, *Social Research*, 69/2, 2002, pp. 579-619.



Добровольное Общество Содействия Армии, Aviации и Флоту [Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy]. Arendt claimed that the hunting of real and invented enemies by security services was interrelated with domination of legislative, judicial and executive branches by the totalitarian governments and resulted in show trials; i.e. judicial trials held not for the sake of justice but for moulding public opinion. In the former Communist Czechoslovakia the impact of this agitational public opinion moulding can be illustrated by the judicial murder of Milada Horáková, Závaš Kalandra, Jaroslav Borkovec, and dozens of other victims.<sup>15</sup>

Arendt's importance ascribed to the public sphere, emphasizing qualities such as imagination, spontaneity and risk, was very popular among protestors against violation of human rights under the East and Central European totalitarian regimes such as members of Charta 77 [Charter 77] in former Czechoslovakia, Solidarnosc [Solidarity] in Poland and Memorial in the Soviet Union. For example, members of the umbrella grouping Charta 77 assisted various types of victims of the totalitarian regime: banned religious groups and denominations, opponents of several waves of nationalizations of agriculture and industry, members of the state apparatus who did not show their interest in complying with the 'hegemony of the proletariat', or objectors to the Warsaw Pact invasion.<sup>16</sup> In a similar way, student movement in the Faculty of Arts in November and December 1989 aimed at rehabilitation of student protesters against the communist regime; i.e. self-immolation of the students Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc.

I became more radical after my participation in Jan Palach Week in January 1989 where I had been hit by water cannon, felt sick and got the flu. On the other hand, I remember a V.H. statement after Jan Palach Week in 1989: he concluded that Palach's sacrifice is being more and more appreciated. I believe that V.H. had in mind that there was some social and political unrest that had not existed before. Later in 1989, together with my fellow students and some researchers from the Czech Academy of Sciences, I got involved in organization of debates about negative aspects of the socialist regime and future social and political changes. I recollect that I acted as a moderator of one of several deliberations that took place in facilities of Czech Association of Scientific and Technical Societies at Novotného lávka. To put it more concretely, together with other students as well as eminent Czech thinkers such as E.G., J.M. or Z.N., we used to discuss various problems of perestroika and democratization of the stagnant post-totalitarian Czechoslovak regime... (Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, April 2015)

Similarly to Hannah Arendt, the Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller has speculated about origins of totalitarian regimes and their intolerance towards alternative opin-

15 For more details see: Ivan Margolius, *Reflections of Prague: Journeys through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Chichester 2006.

16 For more details see: Hans-Peter Risse, *Charter 77 and the Struggle for Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*, New York 1979.

ions; she advanced the thesis that a totalitarian regime could not be entirely totalitarian and could not do away with pluralism.<sup>17</sup> She thought that certain actors, such as instigators of the Prague Spring in 1968 or the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, did not play the rules of the game and endorsed pluralist perspectives on the totalitarian system.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, political scientists Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan elucidated the nature of nondemocratic regimes by differentiation between totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes, and put an emphasis on variables such as pluralism, ideology, mobilization and leadership. More precisely, they claimed that post-totalitarian regimes were characterized by limited, social, economic and institutional pluralism and conceptualized it as ‘second culture’ or ‘parallel society.’<sup>19</sup> For example, under the East and Central European post-totalitarian regimes, communist cadres and apparatchiks, rarely charismatic people and usually technocrats in the state apparatus, lost their interest in organizing mobilization within the state sponsored and obligatory organizations; they were characterized by a weakened commitment to faith in teleological ideology and turned their attention to a programmatic consensus and rational decision-making.<sup>20</sup> All explanation of liquidation of public spaces and alternative worldviews in totalitarian regimes are also very useful for the explanation of the early post-communist groupings such as *Občanské Fórum* [Civic Forum] or *Verejnost’ proti Násiliu* [Public Against Violence]; the major purpose of these two entities was to integrate the dissident forces in the former Czechoslovakia in order to dismantle the totalitarian regime. These first post-communist East and Central European political bodies had a very loose structure and qualified for Arendt’s ideal of the public space: their members were ‘men of action or adventure’ and charismatic speakers.<sup>21</sup>

The birth and support of the totalitarian movements Arendt also explained by negative consequences of modernization processes and the decline of traditional societies and communities; i.e. modern mass societies lacked positive qualities of previous political and social orders and were negatively impacted by social atomization, the rise of individualism and a lack of meaningful social relations. The anomic tendencies and absence of common values facilitated the creation of a secret police and persecutions of enemies; they also enhanced the seizure of power by the totalitarian leaders and guaranteed unconditional loyalty of masses, which were lacking in intelligence and creative power.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the successful employment of propaganda and terror by the totalitarian movement resulted in its seizure of power; the final

17 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, London 1996. See esp. Chapter 3, *The Destruction of the Public Sphere and the Emergence of Totalitarianism*, pp. 74–75.

18 For more details see: Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, *Hungary, 1956 Revisited: The Message of a Revolution — a Quarter of a Century After*, London 1983.

19 Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore 1996, p. 43.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 45.

21 For more details see: Juliane Fürst and Josie McLellan, *Dropping out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc*, New York 2017.

22 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1951, pp. 450–483.



totalitarian and post-totalitarian regime was characterized by the terror of the totalitarian government as well as by the moderate use of propaganda. In November 1989, the Czech student movement challenged various aspects of power structures such as monopoly of power held by the Communist Party, detrimental effects of state propaganda and a lack of economic, social and political pluralism of the political regime.<sup>23</sup>

I kept memories alive. After a demonstration on the occasion of International Student's Day I spent the weekend at student dormitory Větrník in Prague 6 and participated in lively debates about the course and outcomes of the public meeting. On Monday morning I reached the main building and saw a bedsheet with an 'improvised' inscription Stávka [Strike]. On the other hand, I don't remember everything what happened on certain or specific days and I think the most important student leaders were V.J. and N.D. I very much appreciated the fact that almost all lecturers of the English department were supporters of the striking students. I acknowledged the importance of their attitude; I was proud of the fact that I had studied in the department of English Language and Literature. During those tumultuous days I used to transcribe various documents in so-called 'writing room'; its importance was highlighted in the documentary film *Holky z Fildy* [Revolution Girls]. The documentary was directed by T.M and N.D. and appeared in 2009...

(Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, June 2016)

#### **EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH THE FORMER STRIKING STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS FROM HABERMAS' PERSPECTIVE ON CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE**

Within the framework of these diversified debates, the German scholars Ulrich Beck and Jürgen Habermas are proponents of a reform of the European public space; they have been defenders of a common currency as well as legitimation principles of European institutions, including their administration. The perspectives of these two thinkers are anchored in the methodological approach of the Critical Theory and their concepts have very often overlapped; while Habermas has aimed at a renewal of historical forms of the bourgeois public sphere and has seen emancipatory potential in the mechanisms of deliberative democracy, Beck has proposed a replacement of national policies and national worldviews with his conception of cosmopolitanism.<sup>24</sup>

Habermas has aimed at reconstructing the world order of Immanuel Kant and has accentuated legal universalism as well the importance of human dignity for ju-

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Marek Benda, *Studenti psali revoluci* [Students Wrote a Revolution], Prague 1990, pp. 13–43.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity*, *British Journal of Sociology* 51/1, 2000, pp. 79–105.



dicial and legislative decisions; decision-making processes grounded in deliberative democracy should be realized in a world parliament and not in an 'ivory tower', characterized by parochialism and narrow-minded debates about legal matters.<sup>25</sup>

The origins of these reflections can be found in Habermas' famous book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; he argued that the early bourgeois regimes brought about a new configuration between the private and public domain, citing the British, French and German developments. To put it more precisely, Habermas has traced the emergence of the ideal public sphere to the early stages of capitalist development and had defined it as a challenge to feudal forms of social arrangements and their forms of domination. The protestations against state policies were initiated by the third estate, i.e. British, French and German commoners, who were capable of debating at distinct 'meeting points' and function as intermediary bodies between state structures and individuals.<sup>26</sup> These germs of modern civil society forces were dependent on the support of an autonomous economic society and their primary organizing principle was freedom of association.<sup>27</sup> It is argued that student participation in the Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia was comparable to deliberative efforts of actors who had been involved in constitution of early bourgeois public sphere; identities of Czech students were shaped in the privacy of their families and they were capable of acting beyond their private interests.<sup>28</sup>

I thought about prospective changes around countries and regions of Central and Eastern Europe after the introduction of reformist Gorbachev policies. On the other hand, I was not aware about the circulation of information on notice boards such as Situace [Situation] or Ústřety [Responsiveness]. I also used to spend some time abroad and I felt nothing was happening. In the middle of the revolutionary year 1989 the most important event or protest was the petition Několik vět [A Few Sentences]; it served as a base for the formation of collective consciousness of the cultural and political dissent. The petition was signed by distinct social groups and the petitioners were opinion leaders such as famous dissenters and conformist intelligentsia as well as completely unknown people; alternative media (Radio Free Europe, The Voice of America, and others) regularly reported on the growing lists of those who had signed it. I found out that some of my courageous fellow students in the Faculty of Arts such as A. K. or M.W. had signed it and I decided to follow suit ... (Interview with a former male student and a current member of the European administrative elite, April 2015)

In places such as German cafés, French salons, and British reading rooms, the new bourgeoisie deliberated about common issues and on the basis of a common perspec-

25 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, Malden, 2009, p. 65.

26 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1991, 57–78.

27 *Ibidem*, pp. 73–79.

28 Cf. Marek Benda, *Studenti psali revoluci [Students Wrote a Revolution]*, Prague 1990, pp. 69–87.



tive was capable to intervene in public affairs. Firstly, in England in the Age of Enlightenment places of communication, equality and sociability among heterogeneous groups of men became coffee-houses; they can be characterized as public businesses and women did not attend them.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, French salons were important gathering places in the Age of Reason for distinguished men and women such as Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Madame du Deffand, and many others.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, German reading societies included hundreds of organizations and meeting places for educated elites: clergy, civil servants, doctors, lawyers and professors.<sup>31</sup> Norwegian, Czech, Finnish, Estonian, Lithuanian, Flemish and Danish national movements were also characterized by corresponding meeting places; the gathering places for educated Czechs included reading rooms in libraries (church libraries, scientific libraries, university libraries) and salons with participation of some prominent families (Palacký, Rieger, Bráf, and others).<sup>32</sup> Similarly to intellectual efforts of proponents of the Czech National Revival, Czech student protestations against the communist power were characterized by regular dissemination of public information; student activists spread alternative information by means of illegal or semi-legal bulletin boards and magazines.

I think that I was the first student who regularly ran the bulletin board which existed before the establishment of Situace [Situation] and other student magazines in the Faculty of Arts. I placed them next to the office of Professor V.Z., who was the head of the Department of Czech and Slovak Literature. I used to put there interesting articles which I had read in Russian newspapers and magazines; I think the intellectual and political challenge of Russian articles resulted from Gorbachev's perestroika and the 'backwardness' of the former Czechoslovakian political regime. Several assistants of Professor Ržounek regularly took the articles down from the bulletin board. I put on the bulletin board new ones. To put it another way, they frequently and repeatedly stole the articles. I think it was a game and a vicious circle. On the other hand, I believe that I benefitted from the stagnant political regime in the late eighties: nobody tried to punish me or expel me from school. Thanks to my activities related to the notice board I also debated with my fellow students who were interested in political issues. On top of that, I met there my first wife, A.H., who used to decorate the bulletin board with her graphics...

(Interview with a former male student and a current member of the Czech administrative elite, February 2016)

---

29 Cf. Brian Cowan, *Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37/3, 2004, pp. 345–366.

30 Cf. Dena Goodman, *Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22/3, 1989, pp. 329–350.

31 Cf. Andreas Gestrich, *The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate*, *German History*, 24/3, 2006, pp. 413–430.

32 Cf. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, New York 1985, pp. 3–30.



The bourgeois public sphere emerged almost simultaneously with the decline of sovereign power of the ruler and the rise of a polarity between society and state structures. Whereas in feudal society representative publicness was not constituted as a social realm and can be called a status attribute, the participants in the 'bourgeois public sphere' entered it as private individuals, related through critical judgment of a public making use of their reason towards public authority in the name of public interest.<sup>33</sup> This public use of reason, which was released from narrow class and group boundaries, was realized by educated bourgeoisie and aristocracy in places such as salons, coffee-houses, table and literary societies, while broad illiterate masses were excluded from participation.<sup>34</sup> Both parents of almost all the respondents included in the sample completed their secondary or tertiary education, and thus the analysis of interviews with the former striking students pointed to an interdependence between their educational background and the decision to participate in the student movement...

As a side note, I took part in the planning of the demonstration on the occasion of International Student's Day but I don't remember the items on the agenda: according to my first personal note I attended a preparatory gathering or workshop in the Faculty of Education that was located in the street Magdalény Rettigové in Prague. According to my second personal note, I was supposed to go to Albertov. Taking a hint from other student organizers, I made a banner and went to Albertov: A Latin 'catchword' or 'rallying cry' *Quo Usque Tande* [*How long will it last*] expressed or mirrored my feeling of frustration at the social climate. It was drizzling outside and I was wondering about political alliances and connections of organizers of the manifestation and about the importance of the collective event: I felt uneasy about possible participation of members of the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth and I thought my slogan on the banner was perhaps too audacious or inappropriate. At Albertov I was pleasantly surprised and excited to see the huge number of students and I tried to listen to the official speeches...

(Interview with a former male student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, April 2015)

The decline of the 'bourgeois public sphere' by refeudalization of society was linked by Habermas to interventionism, restoring the unity of the state and society and destructing the relationship between the private and public components. The original centralization of governmental power was transformed into the formative power of the state, which provided protection, compensation, and subsidies for the economically weaker groups. As a result of these processes, the occupational sphere became independent as a quasi-public realm in relation to the private sphere; the private element was reduced to the nuclear family and to the generation of income as its core activity.<sup>35</sup>

---

33 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1991, pp. 102–116.

34 *Ibidem*, pp. 117–129.

35 *Ibidem*, pp. 141–151.



Alongside the decline in paternal authority, the component of intimacy diminished, and individual family members were socialized by extra-familial authorities without the former transmission of a fundamental tradition. As a result of these complex processes, the public represented by the world of letters spread into the realm of consumption and discussion itself transformed into the form of a consumer item such as a panel discussion or a round table talk.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, student rational deliberations in the Faculty of Arts in November and December 1989 lacked any economic motivation and were compatible with the Habermas model of the public sphere.<sup>37</sup>

I took part in a peaceful commemoration act on 17 November 1989 that had been organized by the official Socialist Youth Union of Czechoslovakia. Later I was shocked by the brutal police intervention at Národní Třída and therefore I took part in various meetings of protesters against the intervention. I was interested in the issues and therefore I decided to go to a press conference in the apartment of a signatory of Charter 77, D.N. In front of the house I met several other newcomers; for example, J.CH., A.K. and M.A.F. We were arrested by several plainclothes officers (members of State Security), interrogated for several hours and later released. After several years I read about the broader context of my arrest in the pages of the periodical *Securitas Imperii* (6/II). In the last decades of the Czechoslovakian communist regime, the State Security had tens of thousands of full-time employees who regularly watched or kept under surveillance 'risky' segments of the population including students; the output of the monitoring were comprehensive reports...

Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, December 2015)

Habermas held that the decline of the public sphere was interrelated with public relations and concentrated on profit-making as a commercial business; in public relations people pretended that they did not represent private interest and attempted to convince consumers that they were critically reflecting people who were freely forming their opinion on a certain object. The devaluation of the public sphere was accomplished by transformation of the liberal constitutional state into a welfare state; the new entity was committed to social rights and its two relevant centres of communication were informal nonpublic opinions and formal, institutionally authorized opinions. From Habermas' perspective, a solution can be found in the creation of new publicness and an intraorganizational public sphere, which would be capable to create the linkage between the completely short-circuited circulation of quasi-public opinion and the informal domain of the hitherto nonpublic opinions.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, pp. 159–175.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Alena Müllerová and Vladimír Hanzel, *Albertov 16:00. Příběhy sametové revoluce* [Albertov 16: 00. Stories of the Velvet Revolution], Prague 2009, pp. 5–15.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1991, pp. 211–222.



Habermas' theoretical framework, focused on transformation of publicness since feudalism to this day, can be of some use for an explanation of the specific paths of the East and Central European developments: it is particularly worthwhile for comprehension of the role of critique, rationality and responsibility in several stages of the national revival of small European nations. On the other hand, the bourgeoisie of these nations, the main constituent of the public sphere, emerged under the patronage of the hegemonic nation and was involved in the national agitation. Furthermore, it was nearly identical with the active national intellectual elite and did not realize exchanges or transactions on the national scale.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, this bourgeoisie cannot be compared with the idealized Habermas' one, that proved to be the case on the British, French, and German developmental paths. Nevertheless, its character also differed in a positive sense from the specific type of German middle class, the small-town family, named by Habermas figuratively, in so far as its cultural activities go, 'Gartenlaube'. To put it in more precise terms, at least some segments of the early bourgeoisie of some small European nations disposed of a high cultural capital (accumulated knowledge, cultural competence, consumer behaviour and other assets) and to a certain degree were comparable to British, French, and German capitalist classes. While their private lives were characterized by economic transactions and Habermas' family intimacy, their deliberations were aimed at spreading of national consciousness among a bilingual population. However, their worldviews and economic strategies were marked by a resentment towards the hegemonic nation and political opposition to aristocracy of foreign descent. The autonomous status of capitalists *alias* patriots was determined by their absence of symbolic representation in the state and political structures; therefore they were not interested in the sphere of influence of the big empires and did not escalate the conflict between the 'national awakening' and the hegemonic nation. These rational, critical, and differentiated discussions among members of the national elites overlapped with actions of civil society forces and covered political and cultural issues. On the other hand, other segments of the national elites contested political domination and influenced the political order of empires through their participation in parliamentary and administrative decisions.

Habermas' theoretical approach to the public sphere is more beneficial for an explanation of the authenticity in public life and various ways of opposing domination and cultural hegemony under the former nondemocratic East and Central European political regimes. Under a totalitarian and post-totalitarian regime, the rule of law did not exist, and the legal code was instrumental for the party state; civil liberties and roots of civil societies were absent. The liquidation of other arenas of civil society forces, pluralist political society and market economy resulted in long-term dissatisfaction of a substantial number of citizens and brought about collective and individual protestations.<sup>40</sup> Anti-systemic opinion leaders, such as Václav Havel and

39 Cf. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, New York 1985, pp. 44–61.

40 For more details see: Harold Segel, *The Walls Behind the Curtain: East European Prison Literature, 1945–1990*, Pittsburgh 2012.



Lech Walesa, were capable of ‘raising awareness’ of the negative effects of totalitarian movements and founded informal groupings; they deliberated on public issues and acted in the name of general interest. Furthermore, the results of the discussions were disseminated at the national and international level and covered diverse topics: negative effects of socialist policies on the Roma people, violations of civil and political rights, cooperation among protesters against East and Central European nondemocratic regimes. While in the first decades the ‘ideological burden’ and censorship of East and Central European public spaces were instigated by ‘true believers’, later developments were characterized by a gradual loss of interest in the official communist ideology and declining participation in the state-sponsored organizations.

The communication channels included dissidents as individual and collective communicators, their diverse documents and communiqués, and receivers such as international media (Radio Free Europe, Voice of America), citizens of the respective countries, and foreign publishing houses. To be more precise, rational debates and protestations against the political regime, instigated by educated individual and collective communicators, were conditioned by their privacy; the private component played an important role for shaping their identity and subjectivity as well as for their pursuit of knowledge.

In brief, Habermas’ perspective on the public sphere can be applied to the two historical periods of East and Central European social realities; a more detailed analysis of the formation of small European nations revealed the fact that Habermas’ theoretical framework, analysing British, French, and German historical developments, omitted issues of cultural hegemony and their importance for the national revival of small European nations. On the other hand, the relevant attributes of Habermas’ model of public sphere had an explanatory effect for the student collective mobilization; i.e. rational deliberations in the name of public interest, and emergence of free speech and free press.

I enrolled in the department of Czech Studies in the Faculty of Arts in 1985. I remember that almost all the candidates who had taken the entrance exams were admitted. I recollect that I was critical of the selection procedure as well as the professional qualifications of the examiners. I also recall that the entrance examination consisted of one written and one oral part; the requirements for the oral exam included the presentation of a personal reading list. My personal reading list contained some ‘libri prohibiti’, such as *End of the Nylon Age*, *The Cowards*, and *The Tank Battalion*, translated into English as *The Republic of Whores* by Josef Škvorecký; *The Joke*, *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by M.K.; *Audience*, *Largo Desolato*, and *The Power of the Powerless*. The board was very critical of my personal reading list and informed me that it had nothing to do with cultural policies and my future studies in the Department of Czech Studies. Then again, I was lucky that the chairperson of the examination board was Doctor V.M., who was a specialist on the history of literature and current streams of the Czech literary canon ...

(Interview with a former male student and a current member of the Czech administrative elite, February 2016)

**EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH FORMER  
STRIKING STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS  
FROM BENHABIB'S FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE  
ON CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE**



American scholar Seyla Benhabib, often labelled as one of the most important representatives of the third generation of the Critical Theory, has contributed to the feminist criticism of the nature of current public structures. Seyla Benhabib joined the Euroamerican debate about structural issues of public sphere by the publication of her dissertation *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. Unlike other perspectives on human rights, Benhabib's feminist approach has taken into account diverse aspects of social relations and plurality of social actors. Our relations to other actors are governed by the criterion of complementary reciprocity; the norms of human interaction are not separated and are complementary. Benhabib appreciated the fact that Habermas' theoretical approach moved the articulation of needs to the centre of moral discourses and 'created a link' between the communicative notion of autonomy and compatibility of the universal and concrete perspectives. In her view, the most important role of the Critical Theory is to support the democratization of administrative processes as well as to articulate the needs and solidarity principles at the intersection of communities and societies.

Benhabib's perspective on women's social participation can be grasped in her criticism of Hegel's conception of womanhood. Hegel was critical of political patriarchy; i.e. the merger between the familial and the political, and the fusion of the private and the public sphere. To put it more precisely, Hegel thought that women were legal persons and was critical of Kant's objectification of women and their labelling as *jura realiter personalia* or *Personen-Sachen-Recht*.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* he pointed to the historical developments and namely to positive aspects of different roles of men and women in the pagan world. Paganism was characterized by an inescapable and unalterable conflict between the private and the public domain: women's actions were guided by divine law and women were responsible for family (life); men's actions were guided by human law and were determined by responsibility for the polis (conscious risk of life).

Hegel illustrated the importance of the division of roles between men and women in the ancient world by the illegal action of his favourite female character in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*: she made efforts to bury the body of her brother Polycines. According to Hegel's interpretation of the clash between Antigone and Creon, Creon stood for 'male' virtues and Antigone for 'female' ones: while Antigone was related to the 'hearth', gods of the family and the 'nether world', Creon represented the law, dictates of politics and 'this world'. Hegel suggested that Antigone's courageous and passionate attempt to bury her brother Polynices should have been interpreted as her compliance with 'female piety' *alias* divine law.<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, the current feminist perspective has suggested that Hegel's linkages 'women-divine law' and

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem., p. 248.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem., pp. 255–256.



'men-human law' were oversimplified and did not take into consideration contradictions between the newly emerging order of the polis and the laws of the extended family. To put it more precisely, Antigone's attempt to bury her brother Polynices should be interpreted as her resistance to the despot Creon and as a public protestation against the power mechanisms.

A feminist interpretation of the role of women in the intellectual and political resistance against the former Czechoslovakian totalitarian and then post-totalitarian regime has suggested that the motivations behind their actions were not generated by their family interests and went beyond the private sphere; in November and December 1989 female students in the Faculty of Arts were authentic critics of the political regime and the original instigators of the protest actions.

During the summer vacations abroad I was not preoccupied with the social atmosphere in communist Czechoslovakia, after my regular returns at the end of the summer I used to debate prospective demonstrations with other students as well as to support other actions against the system. I also remember that the students and Prague citizens appreciated the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. I was not directly or personally involved in the preparations for the demonstration on the occasion of International Student's Day. But I do remember that the meetings in the apartment of M.P. focused on intellectual as well as practical issues related to student journals: I was a member of the editorial board of the faculty bulletin board *Situace* [Situation] and I was in touch with several contributors. On top of that, in the Faculty of Arts, intellectual or literary seeds of protest or resistance against the socialist political regime were not limited to the notice board ...

(Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, December 2015)

Hegel thought that women could choose their husbands and was critical of feudal laws and outdated customs such as arranged marriages; women were also entitled to property inheritance in cases of death and divorce. Conversely, he had a critical attitude to early female emancipation and had conservative views on love and sexuality; he advocated 'imprisonment' of women within the confines of the monogamous and nuclear family. The key elements of Hegel's conservative views on family and women can be found in his work *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*; men's activities are characterized by freedom, science, concerns about state affairs, and work in the external world.<sup>43</sup> Yet, women are not capable of spiritual struggle and their activities are limited to family and piety, characteristic of the private sphere. In brief, they are placed outside the world of work and they are supposed to be at the disposal of emotional and sexual needs of their husbands. Seyla Benhabib has also appropriated Walter Benjamin's interpretation of history as a 'locomotive derailed' in order to call in question Hegel's convictions about the limited capacities of women to participate in public life.

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem., p. 247.





Furthermore, Benhabib has illustrated the real role of women in public affairs with Hegel's negative attitude to Caroline Schelling, née Michaelis; he made several statements about her detrimental effect on the public morals of German intellectuals. Caroline, together with her close friends Georg Forster and Therese Huber, moved in revolutionary circles in the Republic of Mainz. The political coterie was a product of the French revolutionary wars and lasted only from March to July 1793; then Prussian troops recaptured Mainz and Caroline Schelling was imprisoned on account of her political views. She married August Schlegel in 1796 and took part in family literary projects and German Romanticism; in 1803 she divorced Schlegel and married a young philosopher, Friedrich Schelling. She has been listed among five academically active women during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, daughters of academics at Göttingen University, and she contributed to Schlegel's articles in *Jena Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*; between 1805 and 1807 her further intellectual efforts encompassed writing and publishing of articles in her own name, correspondence with proponents of Romanticism, and assistance to her husband in his articles.<sup>44</sup>

Benhabib has also highlighted historical aspects of the relevant contribution of women to intellectual debates in her work *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. It has covered various topics such as the importance of Rahel Levin Varnhagen, the salons as a female 'public sphere', empirical-analytical aspects of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, the missing normative foundations of Arendt's politics, as well as several other issues. The chapter *Rahel Levin Varnhagen's Quest for the 'World'* was inspired by Hannah Arendt biography called *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (1958); Arendt claimed that Varnhagen was her closest friend, 'though she had been dead for some hundred years'. Arendt's reconstruction of Rahel's story was based upon unprinted letters and diaries in the Varnhagen collection and Rahel Varnhagen can be characterized as a German intellectual and *salonnière*; during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries she hosted one of the most prominent salons in Berlin and Vienna and discussed matters of immediate interest with thinkers such as Friedrich Schelling, Henrik Steffens, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Gentz, and many others.<sup>45</sup>

Benhabib has found out that Arendt's biography of Rachel Varnhagen contributed to an elucidation of the paradoxes of Jewish emancipation by analysis of various relevant identity issues; category of 'Jewish existence', the importance of Bernard Lazare's conceptualization of Jews as pariahs and parvenus, cultivation, romantic introspection and inwardness. Benhabib has emphasized that Rahel Varnhagen's salons were a female public sphere that flourished thanks to intersections of favourable intellectual influences and public policies, i.e. Enlightenment, French Revolution, German Romanticism, Prussian reforms. The crucial period of German intellectual and cultural history was called *die Rachelzeit* and Varnhagen's salons in Berlin and Vienna were marked by espousing of women's views.

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem., 252–243.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, London 1996, see esp. Chapter 1, *The Pariah and Her Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Biography of Rahel Varnhagen*, London 1996, pp. 1–34.



Seyla Benhabib has claimed that there is a tension between discourse ethics, the model of legitimacy and the public space that has resulted from the women's movement and its achievements. She has been particularly critical of the rigid boundaries which Habermas attempted to establish between matters of justice and those of the good life, public interests versus private needs, and privately-held values versus publicly shared norms. When analyzing the compatibility between the private and the public domain, Benhabib pointed to the historical aspects of gender inequalities: the early bourgeois public sphere systematically excluded women from participation in their structures.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the exclusion of women from the early bourgeois sphere and its current residua at the echelons of economic and political life, the analysis of the interviews with the former striking students in the Faculty of Arts in November and December 1989 has revealed a widespread participation of female students in various revolutionary bodies and *ad hoc* constituted departments.

In the residence hall we exchanged information regarding the lack of awareness of the recent Prague events in small towns and villages. Monday morning I went to the main building of the Faculty of Arts and saw a chaotic situation resulting from cancellations of courses, and informal debates among lecturers and students. The first week I decided to follow the strike movement and to live at school. Everyday participation in the student activities was demanding and tiring and therefore I installed myself in the main building of the Faculty of Arts. This was the best way I could work from the morning to the evening and do more things at the same time. I slept in a sleeping bag in one lecture hall. I believe the lecture hall was on the third floor. The first days the situation at school was completely chaotic and everybody was more or less worried about the political developments and the potential dangers. Later on the situation eased and the public fear abated. In the afternoons I would go to demonstrations that took place in Wenceslas Square or the Letná plain but I don't remember any details. The students cooperated with actors and made efforts to address the population in their native cities and villages... (Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, June 2016)

Benhabib has asserted that in the Western European intellectual tradition, identities of women were interrelated with the private domain and women could not take part in public affairs or constitute moral perspectives. According to Thomas Hobbes, John Lock and Immanuel Kant, the actors in the public sphere were exclusively male heads of households who debated legal matters and eventually made other transactions. On the other hand, the household was determined as a domain of intimacy and reduced to the reproductive and affective needs of *pater familias*.<sup>47</sup> The actions of the female striking students in the Faculty of Arts in November and December 1989 demonstrated that the female protesters were legitimate authors of moral or politi-

46 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, Routledge 1992. See esp. Chapter 3, *Models of Public Space*, pp. 89-120.

47 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, Routledge 1992, pp. 246-250.

cal reflections and that their competences were not limited to human activities such as reproduction, love and care.

I think one year or at least several months before the fall of the regime the social atmosphere in former Czechoslovakia was tense and dramatic; I felt that something was happening and together with my friend H.H. I took part in the Jan Palach Week and other protest demonstrations. I would also meet with other opponents of the regime and discuss with them the possibilities and the prospects of a social change. Our small team would meet at Hřebenky in Prague 5 and 'construct hypotheses' as to when and how the political regime would collapse. I had met there the famous Catholic priest and intellectual V. M. who later played an important role in the Velvet Revolution; he spoke at public rallies at Letná or in Wenceslas Square, co-founded the grouping Občanské Fórum [Civic Forum], and was its first spokesperson. He used to bring to the network the periodical of Charter 77, INFOCH, which informed us of the current political and cultural developments. I also read several issues of the faculty magazine Ústřety [Responsiveness] since I knew its editor-in-chief K.M....

(Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, December 2015)

Reflecting on ethical issues and communication, Seyla Benhabib also explored the arguments, put forward by the feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan.<sup>48</sup> In her book *In a Different Voice* Gilligan pointed to the contradiction between the paradigm of moral psychology and the available empirical material, and argued against the anomalous results of her empirical research. Benhabib and Gilligan were convinced that Kohlberg's theory called for a reformulation, since Kohlberg's differentiation between justice and the good life has caused inequalities among men and women.<sup>49</sup>

In her conceptualization of communicative ethics, Benhabib adopted a critical attitude towards several theoretical streams: neoaristotelism and conservative diagnosis of problems in late capitalist societies, and communitarianism represented by communitarian thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer. On the other hand, she viewed positively the Enlightenment heritage and included it in her conceptualization of communicative ethics: it should become the basis for an ideal model of action and should be based on agreement of all actors involved. More specifically, together with Jürgen Habermas, Benhabib turned away from strategic action and argued in favour of a communicative one; she also determined universalisation as an intersubjective procedure and consent of all the male and female participants.

48 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, Routledge 1992. See esp. Chapter 6, *The Debate over Women and Moral Theory Revisited*, pp. 178–202.

49 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, Routledge 1992. See esp. Chapter 5, *The Generalized and the Concrete Other. The Kohlberg and Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory*, pp. 148–177.



In the autumn of 1989 I was reading sociology. I believe that the situation of all the students of sociology was negatively impacted by the fact that A.V., a sociologist and a typical nomenklatura cadre, occupied the two most senior academic positions; he was the Chair of the Sociology Department and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He can be characterized as a typical nomenklatura cadre who feigned an interest in the sociology of the family and was responsible for the 'normalization' of human and social science after the Warsaw Pact invasion of former Czechoslovakia. Immediately after the collective mobilization of students in November 1989 he had to leave all the academic posts and two years later he quit his job in the Faculty of Arts. His pedagogical approach was very authoritarian and lacked any redeeming qualities. In 1988 and 1989, together with my fellow students P.T. and A.K., we read American and British press such as *The Independent*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and others. Sometimes we came across information about protestations in former Czechoslovakia and posted it on the bulletin board. This involved the persecution of V.H. and other members of Charter 77, information about police interventions in illegal demonstrations, and collecting signatures for the petition *Několik vět [A Few Sentences]*...

(Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, December 2015)

As a result of the different role of the public and private component for the majority of men and women, the female experience has been determined by the 'narrative structure of action' and the 'standpoint of the concrete other'. Despite the critical attitude to women's art of the particular, Benhabib made a connection between the female 'web of stories' and Arendt's understanding of the common world. More specifically, she thought that the female experience with the shared world and its narratives could be useful for a redefinition of moral judgment *alias* empowerment of women.

When studying in the Faculty of Arts, I was aware neither of bulletin boards nor of any other forms of individual or collective student protestations. My priorities were given by my personal situation and the study problems. Firstly, I came from a small city; secondly, I was a sophomore and I had to struggle to learn English. In brief, I did not have a thorough knowledge of any social and political developments in former Czechoslovakia or elsewhere. I believe I passed the entrance examinations for the Faculty of Arts by dint of my knowledge of Czech language and literature. On the other hand, English language and literature were difficult; as I had to learn a lot of English expressions, I floundered through my studies. I recall the Palach Week, with allusions to demonstrations and jokes about them. For example, our Scottish lecturer would always make subtle and suggestive remarks about anti-regime demonstrations: Were you in Wenceslas Square? What? Have you been to Wenceslas Square? I cannot hear you because I have water in my ears. I must get rid of the water in my ears... I think such remarks and informal conversations in the Department of English

and American Studies were important and brought together and united the students and the lecturers...

(Interview with a former female student and a current member of the Czech cultural elite, June 2016)



## CONCLUSION

Habermas' theoretical framework has pointed to the fact that the educational background of students and their interest in a revitalization of restricted public structures were interrelated and played an important role for their participation in the course of the Velvet Revolution. According to Habermas' model of public space, students as private individuals made efforts to constitute an alternative public domain in the name of general interest. From Habermas' perspective, students' efforts to constitute pluralist public domains can be characterized by reading news posted on bulletin boards, informal meetings in cafés, agitation outside of Prague, and the like.

On the other hand, Arendt's reflections highlight the fact that in revolutionary times boundaries between the private and the public component do not exist; this mechanism can be illustrated by students' daylong sit-ins at educational institutions, contributions to revolutionary activities by private donors, and the provision of free services by individuals and institutions. Arendt's idealization of the polis related to her conception of action has been very useful for an elucidation of the emergence of unique forms of public spaces; these temporary entities were characterized by spontaneous contributions of diverse charismatic orators.

Benhabib's feminist approach referred to the role of deliberative processes and gender divisions at public functions and structures; students' collective mobilization in the Faculty of Arts of Charles University was characterized by advanced tendencies. In November and December 1989 revolutionary strike committees at the Czech Technical University, as well as other departments of Charles University, were mostly composed of male students. Conversely, the participation of male and female students in the Faculty of Arts was more or less equal; women were on the strike committee, on various occasions they acted as great speakers and instigated risky undertakings such as humanitarian aid for Romania. Furthermore, the interviews with the former striking students in the Faculty of Arts also referred to the rule of female students in informal or semi-formal revolutionary assemblies.