



## Protest as a Way of Social Communication

**Jakub Šlouf, Spříznění měnou: genealogie plzeňské revolvy 1. června 1953** [Monetary Affinities. Genealogy of the Pilsen Revolt], Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, 2016, 382 p.

In his monograph titled *Monetary Affinities* Jakub Šlouf describes one of the most extensive protests in the period of state socialism, the June revolt in Pilsen sparked by the monetary reform in 1953. It is a model study in which, thanks to a precisely elaborated methodology, the author was able to process a plethora of archived material and to offer a convincing review of the Pilsen protests.

The book does not begin with the introduction of the monetary reform and the depiction of the outbreak of the protests as one could suppose; rather, it examines the tradition of protests handed down in the Pilsen region after the World War Two. Šlouf recalls a not too obvious fact that the form of a protest never comes out of a vacuum, but from a long-rooted culture of protests. It is shaped not only by every cry of protest, but also by other forms of collective activities that influence the potential emergence, the course, the form, and the outcome of a protest. That is why Šlouf focuses on concerted protest actions that preceded June of 1953, as the demonstration on the anniversary of the liberation of the city by the U.S. Army in May 1948, the demonstration during the funeral ceremony for the former President Edvard Beneš in September 1948, the unsuccessful attempt to stage a demonstration on the occasion of the next anniversary of the liberation of the city by the U.S. Army in May 1949, and the strikes in the V.I. Lenin Works between 1949 and 1953.

Šlouf understands a protest as a specific form of communication, which is understandable to different parties to the conflict precisely because it draws on “a longer-term cultural framework shared by the population segment concerned, it adopts the negotiation models and experience taken in previous incidents, and makes it understandable to a broader audience” (p. 9). One of the preconditions for the intelligibility of such communication is based on the fact that it uses established collective interactions — for example, in the case of the Pilsen rallies, the wreaths laying for the American liberators, which led to spontaneous marches, or interrupting labour production and gathering of workers’ crowds outside factories. The June protests in Pilsen largely recalled the familiar ways of acting. “Such standards of conduct were generally understandable to the spectators and therefore effective” (p. 33).

During protests, social conflicts are also being ventilated, which are, especially in the Stalinist period, in which free space was lacking for social discussions, harder to capture in other written sources. Therefore, research on demonstrations offers a great explanatory potential, which has not been sufficiently exploited in the Czech historiography.

Šlouf focuses not only on the objective possibilities and consequences of the protests; he also examines the subjective motives of their participants. As a result, he concludes that the Pilsen protests were not concerted actions of an anti-communist crowd, and the individual participants could have had different motives for partici-

pation and differing sources of anger. To analyse the subjective sources of protest, Šlouf starts from the current debate in the research on the social movements on the role of rationality and emotion in the development of a protest. He brings to the Czech historiography the concept of moral emotions advanced by the sociologists Jeff Goodwin and James Macdonald Jasper. “According to them, a protest is born at a time when the external circumstances call into question individual or collectively shared values and identities of potential participants. Questioning values produces a specific kind of moral emotion, more particularly a sense of grievance, anger, fear, or indignation. Of course, these emotions do not necessarily lead one to take action and, for example, they may result in resignation. But if the crude emotional material and energy from it can be redirected in a pro-active way, it will be expressed through protest” (page 30). The interconnection between the objective cause research and the possibility of a protest (such as less space for political participation of lower echelons of society, overtaxed party structures during the introduction of the reform) and subjective motivations for protest, allows us to figure out a more vivid image of the Pilsen demonstrations and to make visible otherwise undetectable cultural and social period phenomena.

Finally, the focus is on *social learning*, which takes place not only within the period in the individual protests, but also in a single demonstration. Šlouf explores how, during one demonstration, the protesters in specific interactions were taught how to behave in public space, what was still considered legitimate, and what was beyond the boundaries of the accepted conduct. In the same way, the security forces learned that they did not have to intervene against each protest rally, and were taught primarily to prevent protests by others, adopting preventive methods. During these interactions, there is also a distinction between “what is and what is not the essence of the dispute, and on what sociocultural ground the conflict actually takes place. This evaluation affects to a large extent the set of possible conflict resolution resources” (p. 34).

Šlouf concludes that the Pilsen revolt can be divided into three parallel, intertwined protests. The first broke out within the party itself and was caused by the social implications of the reform, but also by the arrogance of its implementation and the disregard for the party’s privileges. The second conflict flared up among the industrial workers who formed a privileged segment of society. Their form of protest was mainly the learned social interaction — stoppage of work, which was based on the tradition of the strikes that occurred between 1949 and 1953 during the first five-year plan. The third source was the conviction of a section of society that Czechoslovakia should, among other things, be politically aligned with the “West”, based on the experience of the liberation of Pilsen by the U.S. Army.

Thus, for many participants, the protest did not represent an anti-regime action as it also included the so-called loyal opposition, in which the participants called for an upgrade of the regime in various ways. Just as the protest changed during the first day, the approach of the party members and the security services was transformed. In the morning, the workers’ resistance was taken as a legitimate reaction, during the afternoon the party authorities assessed the protest as an attempt at a reactionary coup, which meant a voluntary cessation of participation in the protests for a number of loyal opposition figures. Paradoxically, the anti-communist resistance of the pro-





tests was invented by the party leadership. The “revolt, which, in terms of subjective motives of its actors, did not form a solid whole was a kind of social communication, not an attempt at a power coup, and in the system it was collectively performed (it functioned) as an anti-communist uprising” (p. 350).

The relatively rapid end of the protests, according to Šlouf, not only resulted in an extremely extensive application of repressive measures, but also in a reduced social discontent by completing the exchange of the currency, paying the first advances on wages and restoring the retail network, and finally, in the disunity of the opposition to monetary reform. The overall decline in loyalty to state socialism was compensated in the future by increasing living standards and stabilising social circumstances.

Although I have highlighted in the review only some of the key contributions of Šlouf’s approach to the historiography of the protests, namely the strong explanatory potential of the hitherto invisible social and cultural conflicts, examining the culture of protests, subjective motivation of participants and the process of social learning, the publication offers a number of other inspirations for everyone who addresses this problem. It also represents a valuable contribution to the debate on the early building of the socialist dictatorship.

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