



Envisioning Socialist Utopia: The Czechoslovak Program of Self-Governing Socialism¹

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*If capitalism was purgatory
then Soviet socialism is hell
In the last stage of class relations
we see fully laid bare the bones
of the stupid violence of the right of the powerful
the mirage of a classless society
is reflected to us within our grasp
but none of us knows how fathomless is that deadly wilderness
that separates us from it²*

Particular groups of the radical left that existed under the state socialist regimes are not currently receiving an overwhelming amount of scholarly attention. If they do receive any attention at all, then the majority of their actors are placed within a master narrative, which specifies that the path to freedom took the form of political opposition. The fact that radical leftist stances, theoretical foundations, and goals were far removed from visions of liberal-democratic society based on a capitalist system of production is dismissed in the final result of the extinguishing of state socialism. Radical leftist intellectual speculation, which is frequently also a political practice, is thereby legitimized, while its contents are overlooked, or are not taken especially seriously. Within the context of neglecting authentically socialist visions, Nikolay Karkov introduces the term “double erasure,” which first took place within state socialism and, subsequently, in post-communist “liberal democracies.”³ At first, radical leftist groups were subjected to various forms of state socialist persecutions; later on, they were elided within the liberal master narrative of a “road to freedom.”

The following paper wishes to break this rule. This paper presents the conceptions and visions of the Czechoslovak radical left of 1968 as part of a distinctive intellectual world, with a relatively clear, if utopian, program of social change. In the first steps of this paper, I will outline the concerns of the group known as the Association of the Left and I will detail its program of self-governing socialism. Then, I will provide a sketch of the opinions and Maoist inspirations of the main initiator and protagonist of this group, Egon Bondy. Finally, I shall ask to what extent the Association of the Left constituted an isolated group and whether similar ideas resonated within Czechoslovak society at the end of the 1960s?

2 Egon Bondy, “Rilke in Bildern” (February 1961) in *Básnické spisy I. 1947–1963*, ed. Martin Machovec (Prague: Argo, 2014), 791–92.

3 Nikolay Karkov, “Against the Double Erasure: Georgi Markov’s Contribution to the Communist Hypothesis,” *Slavic Review* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 151–73.

The Association of the Left

The group operating under this name was active from June to August of 1968. The Association of the Left represented a club that brought together elements of the revolutionary Marxist and radical neo-Marxist left, which, according to the demand for its constitution published in the main Czechoslovak communist daily newspaper *Rudé Právo*, aimed to achieve a “genuine socialist democracy” that would differ from the existing degenerate formalism, opportunism, and compromise. In addition to the events in Czechoslovakia itself, the Association also focused on the class struggle and revolutionary endeavors underway in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the capitalist states of Western Europe.⁴ For example, the duplicated circular *Informační Materiály* [Informational Materials], edited by Petr Uhl, printed an interview with Rudi Dutschke, and among other issues referred to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the national liberation struggle in Latin America.⁵ In its orientation toward the Third World, the Association was close to the *Societas Cosmopolitica* association at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, and in its political radicalism also to a small but nevertheless considerably active segment of the Czech student movement, which aligned itself with the Western New Left.⁶

The main initiators of the aforementioned association, with which approximately 50-150 people were involved, included the poet and philosopher Egon Bondy and his partner Julia Nováková. The historian Jaroslav Pažout states that meetings of the Association were most frequently held in the couple's flat.⁷ Bondy's radical left-wing opinions were influenced by Trotskyism, and at the end of the 1960s, above all by Maoism, with a strong anti-bureaucratic focus embodied in the demand for the constitution of the club. These ideas resonated within a generationally and professionally heterogeneous circle of people composed of socialist-oriented figures of various diverse types: Petr Uhl (Trotskyist-oriented intellectual connected to the French environment), Otakar Hromádka (veteran of the international brigades of the Spanish Civil War), Vladimír Říha (professor of the Socialist Academy), Jiří Kořínek (member of the University Commission of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), the academic sculptor Rudolf Svoboda, the evangelical operating within the environment of Marxist-Christian dialogue Pavel Filipi, Tomáš Sigmund and Václav Trojan (students at the Faculty of

4 *Rudé Právo*, May 11, 1968, 2.

5 See also Miluše Kubičková and Jiřina Šiklová, eds., *Studenti a ideologie na západě (dokumenty)* (Prague: Horizont, 1969).

6 On both of these groups see the chapter “Radikální studentská levice v Československu, Názorové sdružení levice,” in Jaroslav Pažout, *Mocným navzdory. Studentské hnutí v šedesátých letech 20. století* (Prague: Prostor, 2008), 213–19.

7 Pažout, 218.

Arts at Charles University), the radical student activist Jiří Müller, and others. The common denominator of this conglomerate of people, influenced to varying degrees by Trotskyism, Maoism, anarchism, the Western student movement, and critical theory, as well as by some figures in a Marxist-Leninist and neo-Stalinist mold, was their extremely reserved relationship toward the official program of reforms of the Prague Spring on one hand, and their response to the then nascent groups of a neo-socialist, liberal-civic character, such as the Club of the Non-Party Engagés (KAN) on the other.


The Association of the Left, similar to other unregistered and therefore practically illegal associations, was dissolved a few days after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies. Despite Egon Bondy's attempts to extend the association to other cities, primarily the industrial region of Ostrava (similarly to Ivan Sviták in the case of KAN),⁸ his activity remained limited to Prague. The activity of the group, with regard to its ephemeral nature, should not be overestimated. Other than approximately four meetings of a plenary character, with a main lecture by Egon Bondy and a subsequent discussion, a dual publication of the circular *Informační Materiály*, including the cyclostyled "Stanovisko" (Statement) on the present situation in Czechoslovakia dated July 2, 1968, there are few notable activities. It is possible to consider Miloš Calda and Petr Uhl's Czech translation of *An Open Letter to the Party* by Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski from 1964 (published in Czech by the Prague student parliament in June 1968) to be a production in connection with the Association of the Left. Despite the somewhat marginal nature of the aforementioned group and its brief existence, its political program, elaborated in the documents of the Association of the Left, ranks among the most sophisticated political programs of 1968. Even if it is based to a certain degree on a critique of actually existing socialism, and although it draws attention to the pitfalls of reform of the communist program, it is far more than a mere negative delineation that is positively oriented. It is directed primarily at a concretization of what democratic (i.e., self-governing) socialism should actually be and how it should appear.

The Revolutionary Program of Self-governing Socialism

Egon Bondy's extensive programmatic essay "Dělnické samosprávy a revoluční strana" ["Workers' Self-Government and the Revolutionary Party"] was printed in *Informační Materiály*.⁹ At the same time Bondy, on the in-

⁸ This is attested to by the fact that the first part of Egon Bondy's text, "Dělnické samosprávy a revoluční strana," was published in a daily newspaper of the North Moravian Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. See Egon Bondy "Rady pracujících a co k nim všechno patří," *Nová svoboda*, June 14, 1968, 3.

⁹ The full text, after due editing, is published in Egon Bondy, *Pracovní analýza a jiné texty*, ed. Petr Kužel (Prague: Filosofia, 2017), 366–83.



initiative of other supporters (“comrades”) of the Association of the Left, also compiled and submitted for subsequent discussion the “Stanovisko,” which, among other factors, constituted a critical analysis of the current events in Czechoslovakia after January of 1968. In an endeavor to demonstrate the originally Marxist (and in no way derivative or revisionist) character of the political program of self-governing socialism, both texts explicitly related practically exclusively to Marx and Lenin, including with regard to questions of *permanent revolution* (referring to the German Ideology) or the form of the revolutionary party. Nevertheless, the influences of Leon Trotsky as well as the pair of Polish authors Kuroń and Modzelewski are beyond dispute, although Bondy drew his main inspiration from his own interpretation of Maoism. It was the last of these that was responsible above all for Bondy’s emphasis on the permanent ideological struggle against residues of bourgeois consciousness. Similarly, the influence of Maoism did not renounce its goal in the form of removing the class character (the non-antagonistic and potentially also antagonistic class divisions)¹⁰ of the socialist society of the time. Socialism was defined as a transitional state, in which, although new regularities of the now actually classless society emerged, many elements nevertheless persisted that were typical of class society and which constantly threatened to restore class relations. The Association of the Left was concerned with averting this danger in the form of the creation of a “manipulated consumer” type of person.¹¹


According to this analysis, the class character of socialist society is necessarily determined by the level of the economic infrastructure (economy of scarcity), which still reckons with production based on a forced division of labor and the economic coercion of working people. It is labor and not need, as ought to be the case in the desired state of communism, which also serves as the fundamental standpoint in the redistribution of products. This tendency is determined above all by the formalized socialization of the means of production, which in reality are not controlled by the people but by the party bureaucracy, economic-technocratic management, and the top party intelligentsia. In relation to the people, all of these layers take on the role of a “manipulator, monopoly employer, and society-wide manager,”¹² by which they *de facto* prevent the removal of the class aspects of socialist society; instead of socialism they reinforce the exploitative nature of the state, or more precisely, the state-party elites.

According to the Association of the Left, although the political and social process that began in January 1968 may have been able to renew

10 Zbyněk Fišer, [Egon Bondy], “Marxismus u Mao Ce-tunga”, *Zprávy Československé orientalistické společnosti při ČSAV* 7, no. 2 (1967): 44. Reprinted in Bondy, 351–58.

11 Egon Bondy, “Stanovisko,” in Bondy, 387.

12 Bondy, 386.



efforts to establish guarantees of democratic and humanist socialism that could evolve into communism in Czechoslovakia, the main danger was nonetheless evident in the mere replacement of the old state-bureaucratic layer with a new one. A social grouping composed of more flexible elements of the state-party bureaucracy, economic-technocratic management and elites of the liberal-oriented opposition of the party, and non-party intelligentsia would ultimately adopt a manipulative and exploitative position toward the people—just as the previous structures had done.¹³ The group of the radical left that had centered around Egon Bondy saw this danger in the fact that all of the reforms were being implemented by top-down decision making instead of involving an activation of “all working people.” Attempts were made to pacify proletarian activities directed toward overseeing the democratization process. Therefore, instead of a socialist democracy, there was a danger of the creation of a liberal “sham democracy,” based on the monopoly state ownership of the means of production and political liberalization—in other words state capitalism.¹⁴

The “Statement,” like Bondy’s previous essay “Workers’ Self-Government and the Revolutionary Party,” demanded that the Communist Party place itself at the vanguard of the revolutionary process and create such guarantees that would prevent the return of state-party bureaucracy as the dominant social force, as well as preventing the installation of state capitalism. For this purpose, both texts laid down a challenge for a thorough restoration and adherence to internal party democracy. The circulation of paid and elected representatives was to be reassessed.¹⁵ The main attribute of the revolutionary nature of the party was to be a reduction of the multi-level vertical party structures down to a two-level structure,¹⁶ in which the first level would be embodied by the party membership plus the local party organizations, while the second level would serve as the political headquarters. A fundamental role was to be played by a strengthening of the position of the local party organizations and the reconfiguration of the party’s functioning from a vertical to a horizontal organizational structure. According to this document, the program of official economic reform compiled under the leadership of Ota Šik threatened to subordinate socialist development to economic interests (economics determines politics, not the inverse) and the absolute dominance of technocratic management, as had taken place in Yugoslavia.¹⁷ According to Bondy, “Democracy, or political and civic freedoms”


13 Bondy, 388.

14 *In Pracovní Analýza*, Bondy differentiated between socialist, state-capitalist, and Western monopoly capitalist states.

15 Egon Bondy, “Stanovisko,” in Bondy, 390.

16 See primarily Egon Bondy, “Dělnické samosprávy a revoluční strana,” in Bondy, 369–81.

17 Bondy, 377.



that “are not supported by an actual satisfaction of the needs and interests of the broadest layers of working people, cannot be either stable or durable.”¹⁸ In contrast with bourgeois democracy, which, metaphorically speaking, ends at the factory gates, genuine socialist democracy should be oriented toward the sphere of the direct producers: laborers, technicians, scientific workers, and so forth.

In order to attain such a state, the main emphasis was to be placed on the creation of self-governing socialism. The term self-government, in this conception, was related both to the manufacturing process, and specifically to control of the means of production, and to politics, namely the Communist Party. Here, only a consistent application of self-government within the framework of both mutually interconnected realms could lead to a genuine socialist democracy. In the opinion of the Association of the Left, in Czechoslovakia it was necessary to fight for this goal by means of a revolutionary process that could confront both the conservative circles in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, as well as numerous non-socialist tendencies. According to the Association of the Left, the development of an advanced socialist society should then be progressively directed toward establishing a community of self-governing producers, which would gradually take over all state functions.¹⁹ However, in the case that the political development was lagging behind the process of self-government in the sphere of production following experiences with the historical development in Czechoslovakia (the regimentation of the unions after 1948), Poland, and Yugoslavia, it was expedient to build a system of workers’ self-defense in the form of independent unions and strike funds.

The dynamic organization of the revolutionary party was to be built in direct proportion to the sphere of production, but not in parallel with it. Under socialism, the separation of political and economic power could not prevail, since every economic activity, understood in Marxist terms, also has an inherent political and social aspect. The goal was therefore not to build one production and one political structure, but rather a unity of the execution of economic and political power-administration: “e.g. the council of the factory or the agricultural co-operative is at the same time the lowest and most fundamental element of the entire state organization, enabling a maximal increase of flexibility in the practice of autonomous self-governments.”²⁰

¹⁸ Bondy, 367.

¹⁹ Egon Bondy, “Stanovisko,” in Bondy, 392.

²⁰ Egon Bondy, “Dělnické samosprávy a revoluční strana,” in Bondy, 376–377. Bondy here referred directly to the model of Chinese people’s communes and similar models in Romania at the time. Bondy further elaborated upon the theme of the organization and structure of the revolutionary party in *Pracovní analýza*. See the sub-chapters “Revoluční organizace. Její struktura” and “Revoluční organizace. Její funkce a způsob práce” in Bondy, 238–56; 256–57.

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