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*From Political Activism to Social Protest: the “Gypsy Question” in Czechoslovakia  
1948-1989*

This paper seeks to address the conference theme of “New Histories of Politics” with an exploration of dissent around the so-called “Gypsy Question” in Czechoslovakia from 1948-1989. The social and economic marginalisation of the Romany minority, combined with continued manifestations of cultural difference, were often presented by state and Party institutions in Czechoslovakia and other state socialist regimes as an affront to communist ideology. In contrast, this paper will suggest that the “Gypsy Question” was less a test of ideology than of the legitimacy of communist regimes, particularly in the post-68 period of ‘really existing socialism.’ The paper will outline social responses to the ‘Gypsy Question’ from the early period of building socialism to the years of normalisation, when Charter 77 declared the treatment of the Romany minority to be a ‘symbol of a deeper, general malaise of our whole society.’ Finally, the paper will turn to the title of the panel (“Discourses of Power”), asking whether the notion of discourse – now so inevitably associated with Michel Foucault – is useful as a critical tool for evaluating the case at hand, or whether both ‘dissent’ and ‘discourse’ should not rather be seen as historical products of the relationship between ‘power and protest’ in the Cold War era.

*The “Gypsy Question” in Czechoslovakia 1948-1989*

The “Gypsy Question” was a phrase frequently used in official discourse in communist Czechoslovakia to refer to the social and economic marginalisation of the Romany, or Gypsy, minority. Like the official term ‘citizen of gypsy origin’, which was supposed to replace previous stigmatizing epithets, the phrase soon acquired a pejorative undertone. Given the significant degree of social, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity among the Romany minority in Czechoslovakia, as in other European countries, it would be mistaken to assume an equivalence between the ‘gypsy population’ which formed the subject of Communist Party policy, and individuals

who identified themselves as Romany, or Gypsy. Rather than attempt to trace a history of the Roma as a group, this paper will therefore concentrate above all on the “Gypsy Question” as a site of contention within which different social actors – both Romany and non-Romany – sought to redefine the terms and definitions of policy.

The Roma were never awarded national minority status in Czechoslovakia, but were instead defined in official discourse as an ‘ethnic group’, primarily because they lacked a national territory. A social dimension was added to this ethnic definition from the late 1950s, when a system of administrative classification of ‘citizens of gypsy origin’ according to their ‘level of integration’ was introduced. This conflation of social and ethnic criteria in definitions of the ‘Gypsy’ has been a common feature of government policy, and policing, in Europe since the late eighteenth century, according to social historian Wim Willems. For a communist regime committed to eliminating discrimination on the basis of race and class, the apparent conflation of poverty and ethnicity in the ‘Gypsy Question’ proved particularly problematic. In addition to the perceived failure of Marxist-Leninist ideology to address social inequality, the ‘Gypsy Question’ also came to be represented as a failure of the communist regime’s methods of governance, in particular, of scientific planning.

In the broader context of the Cold War, the treatment of the Roma minority had more than a domestic significance. Studies of the civil rights movement in the United States have emphasised the importance of Cold War rivalry in launching civil rights reforms despite domestic resistance. This paper does not seek to compare the US civil rights movement with mobilisation around the ‘Gypsy Question.’ However, it does suggest that this broader context is vital for understanding the emergence of an international Romany movement in the mid-1960s (with the participation of Czechoslovak activists). Finally, the Helsinki Process launched in 1975 provided dissidents with a platform for presenting the ‘Gypsy Question’ as an abuse of constitutionally-guaranteed human rights. Subsequently the discourse of human rights has substantially influenced the representations of the Roma in central Europe, sometimes to the exclusion of other discourses which may have been de-legitimised after the collapse of state socialism.

*From Political Activism to Social Protest: Mobilisation around the “Gypsy Question”*

The second part of the paper will trace the transformation of social responses to Communist Party policy on the “Gypsy Question.” By following a small group of activists – both Romany and non-Romany – from the 1950s to the 1970s, the paper will suggest that mobilisation around the “Gypsy Question” in post-war Czechoslovakia had its origins in the mass mobilisation of the years of ‘building socialism.’ However, as the regime failed to fulfil its promise of eliminating social and ethnic inequality in the socialist republic, the marginalisation of the Roma increasingly became seen as a test of the regime’s legitimacy.

The paper will focus particularly on three distinct, if closely related, forms of action. First, it will consider the efforts of the small Romany elite in Czechoslovakia to create legitimate collective representation for the Roma based on recognition as a national minority. Secondly, it will analyse the responses of non-Romany experts – particularly ethnographers and demographers – towards state policy on the ‘Gypsy Question.’ Finally, it will explore the involvement of self-conscious dissidents in the treatment of the Romany minority, particularly through the Charter 77 movement.

Of these three groups, only the Charter 77 movement sought to turn the ‘Gypsy Question’ into a platform for opposition against the regime. Furthermore, ‘discourse’ was only one of the forms of resistance used by the groups under discussion, and was perhaps less important than everyday forms of social or cultural resistance, or practical expressions of solidarity.

*Discourse and Dissent: Historicising Protest in Cold War Europe?*

The final section will attempt to relate the case-study of ‘dissent’ in communist Czechoslovakia to the title of the panel: “Discourses of Power.” Given that the very notion of ‘discourse’ – at least in its contemporary Foucauldian guise – was a product of the historical period under discussion in this paper, it seems relevant to ask whether ‘discourse’ itself should not be historicised in relation to ‘dissent’, as a product of social protest against high politics in the Cold War era. In *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*, Jeremy Suri has argued that on both sides of the

Iron Curtain the protest movements of the 1960s influenced Cold War politics, causing political leaders to stabilise international relations through the policy of détente. Whether or not one agrees with this thesis, the attempt to connect 'power and protest' in the Cold War is undoubtedly important. Seen in this context, the concept of 'discourses of power' is perhaps less usefully seen as a critical tool of analysis which can be used to interpret the phenomenon of 'dissent', than as a contemporaneous historical product of social responses to Cold War politics.