

*Kopeček, Michal (ed.): Architekti dlouhé změny. Expertní kořeny postsocialismu v Československu [Architects of the Long Change. The Expert Roots of Post-Socialism in Czechoslovakia].*

Argo, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, Praha 2019, 374 pp. (Historické myšlení 77), ISBN 978-80-257-2808-6 (Argo), 978-80-7308-914-6 (FF UK), 978-80-7285-224-6 (ÚSD).

Thirty years after the changes in east-central Europe of 1989, historians are seeking fresh interpretations of those events, looking for links to longer-term trends and continuities alongside the well-known changes. This work aims to explore one specific theme within that, asking whether the work of experts, understood as highly qualified individuals with the potential to influence society's development, in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia contributed to the apparent triumph of a neoliberal course in later years. The authors chose seven areas: legal studies, enterprise management, management theory, psychotherapy, sociology, ecology and urban planning. This proves to be quite enough to demonstrate that there was no unified experience of experts under normalisation, even if their fate under the democratic regime was often fairly similar. The sources used include archival material – much is now available for the pre-1989 period – published sources and interviews with participants. Most of the book's attention is devoted to the normalisation period, following the thinking and influence of experts, both before and after 1989. In most cases they felt obliged to look back to before 1968, having found significant continuity with ideas developing through the 1960s. Next to the editor Michal Kopeček, who contributed two chapters himself, Tomáš Vilímek, Václav Rameš, Adéla Gjuričová, Matěj Spurný and Petr Roubal contributed to the anthology.

Studying experts in the normalisation period proves remarkably fruitful. The purging of intellectual life after 1968 was very damaging in many, but not all, areas, so that the regime was still blessed with teams of qualified experts to a greater extent than in the 1950s. Enough of them were prepared to make their peace with the new conditions, taking advantage of the degree of independence and of involvement in the international scene that was still available. Some could then prosper under a political system that, rather than the brutal dictatorship of the Stalin period, was based rather on “civilised force.”

This term is explained in the chapter on legal studies. Repression was to be conducted as far as possible under specific laws rather than by arbitrary decisions, and that was often the case. Theoreticians hesitantly formulated the idea of the “socialist legal state,” which could be seen as moving, albeit rather hesitantly, towards the more meaningful concept of the law-governed state, as backed by legal experts active in the dissident community. However, the dominant role in formulating the post-1989 constitution went to individuals who had previously played no prominent role. Both those who had worked within the regime and the most prominent dissidents, former party members who had been active in 1968, were considered unacceptable under the new political conditions.

A common theme in this and several other areas is that the normalisation regime needed experts and that some experts could be tempted in part by the thought that

they were contributing to managing society. To them, the lack of civic involvement was not necessarily a big problem, although they were likely to resent political constraints on the application of their own professional expertise. Some sociologists, although the discipline as a whole was hit quite hard by the post-1968 purge, found a place in efforts to legitimise the regime with the theory of the scientific-technological revolution. Urban planners were remarkably well placed, broadly setting policies expounded even in Politburo resolutions and ensuring that new housing schemes took some account of social needs. They too were not of necessity supporters of civic involvement and suffered a diminution in their role after 1989 amid blanket condemnations of approaches associated with the state socialist past.

Environmental experts present a slightly different history. The regime was sensitive to environmental concerns, but unable to resolve issues of industrial pollution which would have required facing down powerful heavy-industry lobbies. Nevertheless, some degree of civic activism around more local environmental issues was tolerated and expert groups, both in the official and dissident spheres, linked up with wider public concerns. They thereby contributed to delegitimising the regime and seemed on the verge of a bright future after 1989. In practice, they soon faded from view, in part because their philosophy, based on state intervention to support a collective interest, was at odds with the prevailing emphasis on free markets and primacy to independent entrepreneurs.

One rather different case, suggesting more success for inherited expertise, is presented in the chapter on enterprise management. This gives a good account of the working of the pre-1989 system, incorporating information from security police informers who watched the behaviour of managers, but it is not clear that managers should be seen as an expert group and links to post-1989 behaviour are rather tenuous. Much of the new managerial elite was recruited out of the old, but the chapter does not prove that thinking and methods inherited from the past were important to determining who succeeded and how. Indeed, the changed political and economic situation presented opportunities to those with limited regard for rules or to those who could present absurdly ambitious plans for their enterprises. To rise to the top the old career manager had to change, taking forward only parts of their past practices.

In conclusion, the book is successful in contributing to a deeper understanding of the normalisation period and in showing the thinking and influence of expert circles. Some did develop some ideas of value and some contributed to delegitimising the pre-1989 regime but, with the exception of a few individuals who were able to adapt, their later role was for the most part insignificant. The book's hypothesis that their thinking was a significant contributor to the triumph of neoliberalism is not sustained. Reasons for the failure of experts from the normalisation period to wield much influence after 1989 are indicated in individual chapters. Even the apparently well-placed environmental experts would need to have operated in a completely different way under the conditions of political democracy, competing parties and active public opinion. Environmentalists eschewed the road of developing a political party, preferring to be considered still as apolitical scientists and experts. In the words of one, such movements in western Europe tended to appear marginal and unorthodox,

being supported by “homosexuals, radical feminists and the like” (p. 295). Unfortunately, the power of the independent expert without a political base was very limited under the new conditions.