

Neoliberal Approaches Among Czech Philologists and Anthropologists

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Abstract—The paper presents the case of “Rocco”, who at 50 years old, lost his employment as Senior lecturer and now teaches precariously at three universities in the Czech Republic (two state and one private). Through the Rocco’s narration we look at the transformation of the Czech academic system at the turn of the millenium and at the acceptance of the Neoliberal ideology even among those academics associated with the sectors of philology and anthropology. The making light of the case of Rocco would be a good example of “Personal is Political” especially if we consider the political background of the respondent and his decision to reject politics when he started his academic career.

Keywords—*anthropology, qualitative research, Czech Republic, neoliberalism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The story we are going to tell is one of many we can collect from former teachers at Czech universities. We prefer the qualitative methodology; and through in-depth interviews with our respondents we are able to illuminate a very dark side of the Czech academic world. We have also taken into account the perspectives of other members of the Czech academic community, however, our actual goal was to capture the points of interconnection between the “personal is political” credo of one of our respondents and the implication of beliefs in an institution of the former Eastern Europe Bloc. To obtain a deeper insight into the problem, we have conducted a number of unstructured and semi-structured interviews with Rocco (the pseudonym of our respondent) as well as members of the Czech academic community from Prague.

II. THE CASE STUDY OF "ROCCO"

A. Begins

Rocco was engaged in political activities from the age of 13. At first he worked in the main Italian institutional left youth organization, then from his 16 to 20 years of age he worked in some new left, radical left and anarchists groups.

(Rocco) It was during the late Seventies. Already when I was still active in the institutional left, I admired the aesthetics of the “Movimento” [The Movement], the way the people active in the revolutionary left looked

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and their way of doing things. The most representative groups of The Movement at that time were Lotta Continua [Fight on], Autonomia operaia [Workers' Autonomy], the Feminists and the so-called Metropolitan Indians, who, unlike the previous groups, refused any organized forms of revolutionary struggle. All those groups accepted the basic principle known as “Personal is political” - but for members of the Workers’ Autonomy, this was just a formal statement - while the Feminists pushed the most for its implementation into The Movement and into the whole of society.

Most of the literature from that time has been lost. An anonymous text in the English language, known as *Living with an Earthquake*, where there is a fairly accurate description of the *Movimento* from the inside point of view, is easily accessible from internet still today [1]. Rocco, according to his own words, firmly believed in the principle of “personal is political”:

(Rocco) I wanted to offer my sexuality to the political goals of that time... For me Wilhelm Reich was more important than Lenin or Bakunin. The feminists lent me their books and I subsequently refused the principle of phallocracy.

B. Joining the Punk movement

The Movement, in its libertarian and anti-authoritarian forms was extinguished during 1979. At the beginning of the 80’s, Rocco joined the second wave of punk.

(Rocco) At that time I was about twenty and belonged to the oldest of the so-called hardcore punk movements. I joined them because this movement represented in Italy the direct heritage of The Movement of the Seventies. It was an unexpected discovery, mainly because the people from the hardcore punk movement had no direct experiences with The Movement of the Seventies since they belonged to another generation. A good book about those things was written in the year 2006 by my friend Marco Philopat [2].

The Hardcore punk aesthetic never ceased, however Rocco decided to devote himself to study.

(Rocco) Even the most literate punks were not able to finish university. I was afraid and disappointed by this. So I went in search of a field of study far removed from Italian politics and the nice illusions of my youth.

C. Moving to Czechoslovakia

In 1985, Rocco obtained a scholarship in the then Czechoslovakia. To study the Czech Middle Ages was probably a way for him to remove the memories of the past. During the summers he also used to work on archaeological digs of early Middle Age settlements in Central Bohemia.

(Rocco) Czechoslovakia was a completely different world. It was almost impossible to speak about politics, even with intelligent people. They knew little about Marx and Marxism. All my friends wanted to talk about was politics; they used to put all the left-orientated people in one basket, libertarian and Stalinist together - and they had incredible prejudices

towards feminists. I knew a few members of the Communist party, too. Despite my tendency to talk quite a lot, I didn't like to have political discussions, not least because I knew that amongst friends there was always some hidden spy. This circumstance was later confirmed after 1989.

Until 1990, Rocco could visit Czechoslovakia for long time periods but always under visa conditions. From September 1991, he moved to live permanently in Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic. Until 1997 he worked as a translator and interpreter, mainly for the Italian Embassy. In these years Rocco had almost no contact with the academic world or with left-orientated people.

(Rocco) The guys from the Italian secret police told me that they knew about me but they let me work on "sensitive matters" because they considered my past as that of typical "youthful error". I internalized that attitude and started to look at my past as something which is definitely over.

D. Rocco's start of academic career

In 1996 Rocco applied to take doctoral studies at the Charles University of Prague.

(Rocco) I made my decision during a party where the Head of the Department of Slavic Languages was present. He wanted to show to my friends - who were also his students - that he was a generous person, so he invited me to apply for doctoral studies in his department. My friends were two young and pretty girls, and the old professor did not hide his sexual interest in them. I came to realize that some things were not good in the university system.

As support of the last consideration, it is worth reading the harsh critique on the degradation of many universities by Giorgio Cadorini, an Italian philologist active in the Czech Republic [3].

III. THE YEARS OF THE RISE OF A PARTICULAR FORM OF NEO-LIBERALISM

A. The Political background

From the birth of the state in 1993 until July 1998, all Czech governments were right-wing. Although in the Czech Republic there also existed a law similar to the German *Berufsverbot* - politicians and academics that had belonged to the former Communist Party were not banned. Academics were also not officially persecuted even if they had been members of the secret police and counter intelligence. On the other hand, the stigmas of being a "Bolshevik" and a "Stbák", meaning a denouncer or informer during the old regime, which could create problems in a professional career. Many former communists became politicians and made a career in the newly formed right-oriented party; many academics who were very active in the past in the communist party or highlighted in the lists of confidants, proclaimed loudly to be liberals, right-conservatives or even "liberal-conservatives", as many people considered themselves to be in the Czech Republic in order to save their positions of power.

B. The case of Prague

(Rocco) The name of the head of my department was easy to find in the lists of confidants published on the internet. His main opponent in the department was a philologist, a former leading cadre of the Communist Party. One day she made me laugh when she was explaining to me the weaknesses of Marx and Lenin and the greatness of the Bible. But I was not the only one who remembered that just a few years ago she was a zealous

propagator of the so-called "scientific atheism".

A certain degree of distrust began to develop amongst politicians and academics of "migrants", i.e. those anti-communist dissidents who chose to emigrate and then returned to their homeland after 1989.

For another respondent, who we will call Karel, from the same faculty as Rocco but in another field of study:

(Karel) The Nineties were great! We were beyond suspicion because no one could accuse us of being "communists". The students had a thirst for knowledge from the West. But for colleagues, we "migrants" represented dangerous, unmanageable competitors... Anyway, I managed to become the head of one of the departments of the Faculty of Arts of The Charles' University in Prague, and to remove - at least temporarily - a couple of colleagues extremely compromised with the former regime.

In 2000 a new dean of the Faculty of Arts of Prague was appointed - a 39 year old philosopher celebrated as "the youngest academic dignitary to hold this position" [4].

For another philosopher who we will call Svjatoslav:

(Svjatoslav) The election of a dean philosopher was a great satisfaction to us since among us philosophers, unlike all the other departments of the faculty, there was no-one compromised by the old regime.

But for Karel and Rocco the new dean represented the beginning of a neo-liberal policy at the Faculty of Arts of Prague; considered, at that time, the faculty which set the future trends in the humanities of the Czech Republic.

(Karel) Some of my colleagues were removed from their function and replaced with younger colleagues. Young secretaries replaced the older secretaries. They lost their jobs even though they had not yet reached retirement age.

(Rocco) At the beginning I liked the policies of the new dean because he also removed the old lecher professor from his position whom I mentioned before. However I was not used to seeing the firing of state employees.

In 2001, Rocco was employed as a lecturer, first part-time and then full-time. When he became a full-time Senior Lecturer, he terminated his work with the Italian Embassy.

In December 2002, a new Prime Minister of Czech Republic was elected, who was a former graduate at the Faculty of Arts and belonged to the generation officially not directly engaged with the communist party, yet at the same time fully participating with the 1948-1989 regime. In the Faculty of Arts of Prague, a new situation arose for the generation of the former communist cadres who had to limit their management activities within the faculty after 1989. The result of the growth of self-confidence of the former communist cadres was the election in late 2002 of a new dean very close to them. The "young" dean was defeated but in the meantime, the seeds of neo-liberalism were already well established in the general mentality of the faculty - or at least in the minds of many managers.

(Rocco) After the election of the new dean, the young (and not very competent) head of my department was soon and very roughly deprived of his function. The dean, despite the opposition of the majority of my colleagues, installed the former leading cadre of the Communist Party, (the person who had wanted to explain the Bible to me) as the new head of department.

But if the young "neo-liberal" dean was able to change

just the first level of management of the faculty and parts of the administrative staff, the older “conservative” dean was able to cover the actions of those former communist cadres who wanted revenge.

(Rocco) Because of my former political experiences in the West, I tried to organize the opposition at the department and in the whole faculty. But each semester one or two of my colleagues and friends were fired. These were the colleagues who had remained faithful to the young head of the department. They were soon replaced by young doctoral students eager to take over from their former teachers. Some colleagues who accepted the new order were spared.

(Karel) At that time I had no fear for myself because my department was rich and successful, but I could not agree with this kind of policy.

But for an older teacher fired in 1969, who we will call Milena:

(Milena) It was like after 1968. I was really afraid to lose my job again, so I didn't join the resistance.

However, at the end of 2005 a new 29 year old dean was elected, who was a friend of the neo-conservative Minister of Finance and at the same time he was close to some of the former communist cadres of the faculty who had been his teachers. Rocco lost his job in the summer of 2006; Karel lost his position as head of department in 2010 and left the faculty voluntarily after one year.

C. *The case of Pardubice*

Our respondent gave us the possibility to compare the Faculty of Arts in Prague, with the Faculty of Arts of the University of Pardubice.

(Rocco) I went to teach 100 km east of Prague. My head of department was a 29 year old anthropologist. Each year she used to fire some teachers and take on new and younger staff (I was also employed by her because an older colleague was fired before me). I was fired three years later...

D. *Similar scenarios*

It seemed that the example set by the Faculty of Arts of Prague, which was the first institution to elect very young managers, was followed in other universities and similar institutions such as the Academy of Science. In 2007 even the new Minister of Education of the Czech Republic which included also the university system, was a very young 30

year old politician.

(Rocco) My last affiliation was in another Czech university. I was already the oldest member of staff in the department I was working in. I was aware that it was a handicap to be old and despite working conscientiously and respecting all the directives imparted, I knew that this would not be enough. I dreaded the arrival of a new boss. I tried to stay completely apart from all forms of university politics. Of course when a new 30 year old head of department arrived, I was fired after one year. For more than two years I was looking for a new affiliation and I was two years older. After being employed in a private university, I felt myself paradoxically safer.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The case of Rocco has many specific elements but also from the quantitative perspective we know that in the Czech Republic unemployment amongst quinquagenarian has increased from 16.2% to 27.2% during the period 2000-2015. In the year 2018 the rate dropped to 25.2%, but compared with an overall unemployment of only 2.3%. Due to the continuous turnover of university teachers, it is difficult to get updated statistics. It seems that there is not even the political will to tackle the problem because the victims of discrimination try to solve their problems individually - which is understandable considering the disastrous state of the unions in the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, as well as presumably in other countries of the so called former Eastern European Bloc, neo-liberal principles can be a useful tool of intimidation used by unscrupulous subjects already experienced in similar practices, thanks to their pro-regime political engagement before 1989.

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