

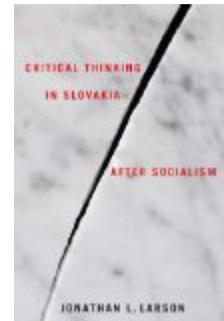


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Rethinking Revolution and Critical Thinking in Postsocialism

“Critical thinking”—is it a buzz phrase of higher education, a prerequisite for democracy, or a missing feature in post-socialist Europe? Jonathan L. Larson, author of *Critical Thinking in Slovakia after Socialism*, argues that not only is critical thinking alive and thriving in Slovakia but it also represents a unique way of practicing post-socialist life. This book challenges the discourse of development which declares that totalitarianism leaves no room for public discourse and that silence equals the absence of critical thinking. Instead, Larson, a linguistic anthropologist with over a decade’s worth of experience in the region, conceives critical thinking as a social phenomenon that allows us to examine more fully the ways that “sociocultural dynamics form, empower and limit knowledge” (p. xiii). He explores different types and levels of intimacy and distance as key elements to both practicing and understanding critical discourse. Testing the myth that socialist history leaves a dearth of uncorrupted critical thinking, the author explores how we can conceive of an entire society as exhibiting or lacking critical thought.

To explore how social criticism has developed during and after socialism, the author conducted research in public, private, and institutional settings over the course of four years between 2002 and 2005. Larson employed a wide range of methodological tools, including participant observation of daily life and the pedagogical and public discourse in a Slovakian gymnasium (secondary-level, university preparatory school), and analyses of literary

archives and popular culture. The focus is on intellectuals, the role of certain forms of knowledge, and the acquisition of such knowledge. Applying sociocultural and linguistic perspectives, the author blends ethnographic insights with historical analysis in an engaging writing style. Although at times the book may be difficult for those unfamiliar with linguistic anthropology to follow, Larson employs a variety of examples and illustrations to clarify his points, which allow the reader to better comprehend the argument.

In the introduction, Larson provides the context for (the lack of) studies in critical thinking and the regional uniqueness of post-socialist central Europe. He explains that this study is a “historical and ethnographic inquiry into why various discursive ideologies of liberalism were introduced to post-socialist Slovakia and how a richer understanding of the encounter with that milieu enriches our understanding of liberalism’s practical limitations” (pp. 2-3). The reader is reminded that in development-speak, critical thinking and public discourse are the “antidote” to the Cold War legacy of repression and censorship. However, critical thinking has not been a problem in Slovakia. Despite centuries of totalitarianism under Habsburg rule, with a short respite of democracy during the interwar period, Slovaks maintained a culture of public discourse during the Communist era. In fact, Slovakian students played just as powerful a role in ousting the Communist Party as did their Czech counterparts. *Expression of critical thinking has been more problematic.*

Western ideals of liberalism and expression of one's individual conscience must coalesce with political subjectivity to lay the foundations for modern democracy; when public expression is absent, democracy is theoretically impossible. Larson challenges this paradigm with a focus on two areas of criticism—pragmatics and ideologies—in order to demonstrate not only that critical thinking has been present for the past fifty years but that it is also an integral part of (post-)socialist sociocultural dynamics.

While each chapter is devoted to a specific area of critical thinking, they combine by the end of the book to provide a novel view of discourse under totalitarian rule. Chapter 1 engages the concept of civic criticism, at the core of which is intersubjective or relational distinction and separation. Larson contends that the ways in which criticism was practiced during socialism still influence the order of society today. He starts by describing the lament of Slovakian intellectuals that civil criticism is dead, suggesting instead that, rather than engaging with each other, intellectuals live on “isolated islands of complaint” (p. 31). Using the examples of *Domino*, a journal aimed at chastising government bodies and institutions, and *Kritika & Kontext*, a journal that provides a forum for critically thinking Czech and Slovak scholars, Larson describes the setting in which the term “critical thinking” is most often voiced but most obviously absent. Instead, Larson pulls back the curtain, looking past the intellectuals' discourse to the quotidian discourses of blame and deficiency. Like a game of one-upmanship, Slovaks tell anecdotes of absurd workplace practices, idiocy, and lack of “civic pragmatism” (p. 48). By evaluating and separating oneself from “those idiot Others,” Slovaks express critical thinking in relation to public life. The underlying theme of dysfunction and the attitude that this is “just how it is here” create a common bond and public space, even when expressed in private settings. Larson refers to such discourse as “frame slippage” through which an evaluation leads to judgment and then to dialogue and attack (p. 63).

Chapter 2 explores the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution and the historical and dialogic features of public criticism. The Velvet Revolution has a special place in Western ideals and imaginations of democracy in central Europe. The peaceful and public ousting of the Communist Party was not the same story of repression and civil war witnessed in other parts of the region but one of solidarity and civic engagement. While humaneness and love were the themes of the Czechoslovak dissident movement, first articulated in Charter 77, resentment and calls for accountability predominated behind

the scenes and after the revolution. Chapter 2 demystifies the myth of the Velvet Revolution, which was neither so smooth nor so revolutionary, through the use of three socially analytic discursive frames: institutional grounds; the chronotope of *prevrat* (overturning); and ideologies of proper emotion in public speech.

After the end of Communism, the focus on ways to handle people's past behaviors was largely played out in the public space of literary journals. The author discusses ways in which social violations had to be made public and journals consequently made public space more interested in moral condemnation than amicable debate and critical discourse. More interesting, though, is Larson's discussion of the chronotope of the *prevrat*. The idea of “overturning” instead of “revolution” is important in order to understand how people were both spatially and temporally mapping the events of late 1989. Larson states that “the notion of *prevrat* ... has served as a frame or kind of chronotope for interpreting one another's criticism in a public sphere surrounding the fall of Communist rule and the emergent new order” (pp. 92-93). The symbolism of pronouns “us” and “them” were nuanced categories that were indicative of one's political and social context at the moment of use. The *prevrat* “scrambled” the indexical references of these pronouns. For example, during Communism, “them” often referred to those in government but after the *prevrat*, dissidents who were categorized as “us” were now in government.

In a similar way, Larson shakes up the indexical reference of the Velvet Revolution in the Western imagination. He points out that the word “*prevrat*” is more apt than “revolution.” Revolutions should be progressive, with dramatic effects on daily life. Overturning of a government, *prevrat*, implies cyclical events not unlike modern-day Slovakia had experienced numerous times earlier in the century. How they classify the event—revolution or *prevrat*—informs Czechs' and Slovaks' actions and their interpretations of the actions of others. Accordingly, each *prevrat* involves a specific type of public discourse—attacking an opponent's credibility, rejecting accusations of one's own impropriety, and discrediting the past.

I find the theme of *prevrat* versus revolution to be extremely timely. Over the past decade, we have witnessed a variety of revolutionary events from the Color Revolutions of the former Soviet Union to the Arab Spring that has influenced much of North Africa and the Middle East; indeed, the latter term alludes to the Prague Spring of 1968. With such comparisons forming a part of public discourse, we need to look back and critique the con-

cept of “revolution” and the discourse that surrounds it. Larson impels the reader to question whether the Velvet Revolution was revolutionary at all. Understanding how people perceive the Velvet Revolution or *prevrat* in local terms allows us to critique and analyze uprisings that occur in other places. In one sense, Larson calls us to approach “revolution,” and other transformative social events, through a broader and longer lens.

In chapter 3, Larson examines the concept of *kritika*, or criticism, in historical context. Much of the official socialist discourse can be considered “wooden language”: that which is generated by and for the public work of the Communist Party. Larson states that, to grasp critical thinking in the (post-)socialist context, we must look at the context of this language and not label it as a “series of monologic statements” (p. 105). He examines the role of intimacy through the use of “us” and “them” in two environments—textbooks and censure. “Communist parties ... needed their members to think critically not only about society but also about the party and their role in it” (p. 107). At the micro level, individuals were encouraged to write letters to Communist officials about everyday problems and to practice technologies of the self through self-criticism. Both self-criticism (*sebakritika*) and more general criticism (*kritika*) were social functions with the goal to help the cause of the Communist Party, not the individual. Larson explains how *kritika* became a tool of the state to act on individuals who were working against the goals of the party, making the consequences of any form of criticism unpredictable. Consequently, *sebakritika* and *kritika* became technologies that were both feared and exploited in contradictory ways.

Educational settings and society are the focus of chapter 4. The Western ideal of education promotes democratic order through alternating forms of intimacy and alienation. Slovakia created its own forms of intimacy that situated teacher-student relationships within local communities embedded in the larger politics of the nation. The standard for teaching in Czechoslovak schools was authoritarian teachers assessing rote memory rather than applied knowledge, quality of expressed opinions, or analysis of different points of view. This textual regimentation created a “pedagogical alienation” between the students and the act of processing information (p. 137). Larson asks the important question that, if this form of education suppressed critical thinking, how did the Velvet Revolution and the well-known dissident

movement emerge? While giving them recognition, I feel that Larson could have accentuated the role that university students played as linchpins in the November 1989 protests that eventually led to the *prevrat*, supporting his argument that critical thinking did exist during socialism. He states that we are wrong to assume that the authoritarian and alienating pedagogical relationships have predominated to the present day when we see a mixture of old school politeness and respect with a trust that one’s divergent opinions will not be censored.

The author continues to examine the educational setting in chapter 5 when he pulls the book together and makes the connection between political stability and the methods used to teach students to read literature. Here, Larson discusses the ways that students are “enculturated” to appropriately interpret the canon of literature (p. 164). He draws on the work of other linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists who find that schools are often where we learn ideas about texts that reflect the tastes representative of the current sociopolitical system and that we carry for the rest of our lives. In Slovakian schools, students learn that reading literature is a composite of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” interpretations and that one must determine what is “appropriate” by studying the signs of form and function of the text (p. 165). The canon is not open to interpretation but is the vehicle through which students learn theory of social critique and textual property. Larson makes a key point here that, by practicing such a dominant orientation to literature, students learned that society is in a state of perpetual critique.

In closing, *Critical Thinking in Slovakia after Socialism* has global relevance for anyone interested in the ways that post-Enlightenment critical thought remains active in the public sphere and the ways that schooling shapes society. Larson meets the challenge of making a book on intellectual and educational institutions relevant to a broader audience. For those with a regional interest in central or eastern Europe or a theoretical focus on post-socialism, Larson adds a complex and refreshing approach to the question of whether the framework of “post-socialism” is still relevant. It is also inspiring to see work sited in smaller countries of central Europe. Overall, Larson demonstrates that the broad range of anthropological perspectives offers innovative and alternative ways of critiquing and questioning what we may take as ideological givens.

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