Sebastian LAMBERTZ
Sozialistische Subjektivitäten. Deutungen des „neuen Menschen" in der Tschechoslowakei 1953–1963
(= Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum, Band 146)
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Sebastian Lambertz's book is a revised version of the doctoral thesis he submitted in 2019 at the University of Cologne. It tackles one of the most difficult questions for historians to answer. Rather than pursuing the Rankean question of 'how it really happened', Lambertz attempts to find out what his actors really *thought*; specifically, what they thought of the socialist order that surrounded them.

Assessing the attitudes and opinions of historical actors is notoriously difficult, since even autobiographical sources such as memoirs and diaries are representations often written with an audience in mind. Gauging their credibility is more difficult than, say, governmental records. Lambertz's source material is made up mainly of the letters Czechoslovak citizens wrote to various state bodies as well as the public radio and television. (He did not have access to the correspondence with the Czechoslovak Communist Party.) The book's central hypothesis is that for many Czechoslovaks, the vision of socialist modernity was fundamental to their identity and to how they made sense of the world around them. The implicit model of this 'subjectivity' was the new socialist man (*nový socialistický člověk*), although this remained a rather vague concept.

The book is revisionist at least with regards to the totalitarian paradigm in the historiography, which has led to a clear division of state and party actors and the public. In the Czechoslovak context, it often regarded socialist ideology as a Soviet import that lacked legitimacy. However, the totalitarian narrative was always more widespread in the public discourse than in the historiography, where revisionist views now dominate. In the past thirty years, historians such as Muriel Blaive, Michal Pullmann, and many others have shown that politics in socialist Czechoslovakia comprised complex processes of negotiation between the regime and the population.

Lambertz covers the least studied period of socialist Czechoslovakia between Stalin's death and the beginning of the liberalization that would culminate in the Prague Spring. He focuses on three turning points: the currency reform of 1953, which led to a devaluation of the crown and lost many people a good part of

their savings; Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, which marked the end of the Stalinist personality cult in the Soviet Union and had a gradual impact on Czechoslovakia in the following years; and the socialist Czechoslovak constitution of 1960.

The letters Czechoslovaks wrote to state bodies with reference to these events are, indeed, remarkable. The currency reform undermined one of the key promises of the regime: that hard work for the construction of socialism would pay off for the individual. Furthermore, the regime had denied that a currency reform was imminent until the very last moment, thus eroding trust. While there was some protest, the correspondence also shows a remarkable amount of agreement. Rather than opposing the measure outright, many citizens dealt with the 'cognitive dissonance' (p. 65) by agreeing to the measure in principle but framing their grievance in a way that inscribed them in a socialist narrative. They did so by presenting themselves as conscious members of the proletariat who did honest work (*poctivá práce*), and as members of the Czech or Slovak national community. In other words, they were not like the greengrocer in Václav Havel's famous 1978 essay 'The Power of the Powerless', who ritually displays socialist slogans in his shop window. Instead, Lambertz argues that they used ideological language in a way that provided them with meaning and identity.

The book does well to highlight the public's acute and often unexpected reactions to rights they felt they were granted by changes in the regime's narrative or legislation. As a result of the botched currency reform and Khrushchev's speech, the regime changed its communication. From the mid-1950s, it placed less emphasis on the collective building of socialism and greater emphasis on work as an instrument to achieve an individual standard of living. Lambertz suggests that the letter-writers thus became more assertive and stressed their *right* to individual comfort in return for their labour contribution. The 1960 constitution, often treated as a mere footnote in the historiography, was decisive in this regard. Lambertz shows that it not only served as an ideological confirmation for committed socialists, but that it defined the rights and responsibilities of citizens, including the duty to draw attention to flaws and deficiencies. The document served as their justification to do so, at times aggressively, while at the same time asserting their belonging to the socialist collective. The people held the regime to its word. I was reminded of Charter 77, which was triggered by the fact that Czechoslovakia was not implementing the human rights provisions it had agreed to in the Helsinki Accords of 1975.

Lambertz plays close attention to the role of the media and analyses the letters written to the state radio broadcasting organization Československý rozhlas. Quite consciously, the radio took on the role of mediator between the state and society. Based on reactions to the radio's *Vysílání pro ženy* (Programme for Women), the book shows the ambivalent role of women in socialism, their emancipation from housewife to breadwinner often resulting in a double burden. However, Lambertz does not address the content of the radio programmes and instead focuses solely on their reception in correspondence. The book's last chapter, by contrast, is a detailed analysis not of the reception but of the content of the 1962 TV series *Tři chlapi v chalupě* (Three Fellows Under One Roof). As such, it forms a stark and somewhat uneasy contrast to the rest of the book with its epistolary source base.

Many readers will be sceptical about the credibility of the letters that comprise the book's sources, especially since Lambertz is particularly interested in the letters' 'ideologically based identity patterns' (p. 3). How do we know that citizens did not feign allegiance to the regime to get what they wanted – as Havel's greengrocer did? Lambertz concedes that these 'self-portrayals were partly written strategically' (p. 23). But he argues that the letters were often simultaneously 'generators of biography' (*Biographiegeneratoren*): the act of writing turned into a performative inscription into socialist ideals (and was not contradictory to strategic writing). Indeed, the sheer number of quotations in ideological language, often without a clear purpose, show that these were not the hyper-ideologized statements and ritualization that Michal Pullmann has identified for the period of normalization. The book's point that socialist ideology was foundational to the personal identity of a significant part of the population is convincing.

The core of the book thus makes an important contribution to literature. At the same time, in my view Lambertz does not reach all his conceptual goals. The division between the population and the regime – which he aims to deconstruct – remains strong throughout. The source letters were, after all, written by members of the public to state or media actors and thus reinforce the dichotomy between *us* and *them*. Stylistically, Lambertz's writing tends to be long-winded and somewhat repetitive; he overuses filler words such as *durchaus* and *sicherlich*. There are also a few factual errors, such as the assertion that the Munich anti-communist broadcaster Radio Free Europe was called Radio Liberty from 1964 (p. 111; in fact, both broadcasting organizations existed side by side: RFE broadcast to the Soviet satellite states, while RL broadcast to the Soviet Union).

Most importantly, the book would have been well served by a wider source base. The letters are often left standing on their own, which makes it difficult to judge their impact. This is evident when letter-writers accuse others of anti-socialist behaviour, especially with regard to the German occupation. Lambertz mentions several instances of such slander. One Praguer wrote in 1959 to complain that his flat had been unlawfully requisitioned by a member of the housing administration who, before 1945, had collaborated with the Germans, had hung a swastika flag from his window, and had worn brown shirts (p. 144). As Lambertz writes, in the narrative of the letter, this turned the alleged collaborator into an 'anti-subject' that worked to present the writer as a good socialist. However, the argument was clearly not only an instrument of narration but also a substantial accusation against a specific person. What repercussions did it have? While it would be impossible to follow up on every single accusation made against individuals, Lambertz does not even address their potential role as instruments of defamation. His focus on socialist ideology as a tool of identity thus sometimes results in the underestimation of the significance of repression. Less than ten years after the Slánský trials, this was still an important measure of control. A closer look at records of police or prosecution authorities might have been useful to better contextualize the letters.

Despite these drawbacks, *Sozialistische Subjektivitäten* is an important contribution to the historiography of post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia. The book makes it all but impossible to seriously claim that Czechoslovaks were reserved towards socialism in the period preceding the Prague Spring. It is also timely, showing how dubious ideologies were ossified into individuals' sense of identity and the processes by which even contradicting information was integrated into personal ideological narratives.

Felix Jeschke