

Dana Moree

**Teachers
on the Waves
of Transformation**

Czech School Culture
Before and After 1989

TEACHERS ON THE WAVES OF TRANSFORMATION

CZECH SCHOOL CULTURE BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

Dana Moree

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Acknowledgments

Before I embark on this adventuresome journey of how Czech society has changed in the eyes of teachers at the Chestnut and Linden schools, I would like to thank first and foremost those who have taken the time to answer my questions. I am indebted to them for the time they spent in the interviews, as well as for their courage in lifting the veil of time to provide me with both a glimpse of the past and their invaluable reflections upon the events of the past thirty years.

I would also like to add one personal note: Not only did the teachers in Remízek teach me to read, write and count, they also showed me how to recognize true courage in today's world. Throughout the research, many teachers questioned the hero/traitor narrative. Indeed, I was able to find my answer in part thanks to them. In my view, heroism today means the courage to honestly ponder what is happening in life and to attempt to draw some conclusions from it. I am grateful to all who were willing to join me on this search.

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Foreword to the English edition

When, at the European Educational Research Conference in 2013, I first presented my findings on the changes of two small Czech schools during the transformation from the communist system to democracy, I was sure that it would be of little interest to the international public. Since my research was from a small country and on a subject that had long ceased to be topical, I felt that my audience would have a hard time fathoming it. I was sure that my Western colleagues would regard me both suspiciously and indulgently, like the time in the 1990s that I tried to explain to them that a three-course lunch was nonsense since I could live a month on its cost in a post-communist country.

But I was wrong. My audience listened extremely attentively, asking many questions. They felt a connection to teachers in my research and were compelled to ponder their own situations in relationship to them. I repeatedly experienced a similar reaction, but could not get my head around what exactly my foreign colleagues found so interesting.

One time, I could not resist the temptation to try something which ended up being a turning point in my research. I asked my audience whether they had ever said or did something that went against their inner convictions. The question was first met with absolute silence. But then hands slowly began to rise. Not one or two, but over half of the audience. I repeatedly tried out this exercise in various groups and gradually realized that even my colleagues from the democratic world experienced similar situations. Although the threat of interrogations and loss of job did not hover over them, they could imagine not doing something or, instead, doing something merely out of fear. Nothing leads us to obedience more than fear – an obedience that we do not want, but that we ultimately opt for, since disobedience would make problems for us.

It is on this principle that totalitarian society operated and continues to operate. The same holds true for democratic societies bearing totalitarian features. So, after years of contemplating the matter, I have concluded that the main difference between my experiences from a transforming post-totalitarian country and that of my colleagues from the democratic world is the speed and intensity of these changes. In the Czech Republic, we can follow the transformation from totalitarianism to democracy over the course of a single generation; all processes are apparent and apprehensible during a single human lifetime. They are therefore more concentrated, although corresponding to a certain extent with the life experiences of people living through similar phenomena, albeit in a diluted form.

I thus gradually began to see totalitarianism, like transformation and democracy, as more than pertaining to the political system. Though it is more readily visible on a central level, it begins and ends with each person who has experienced saying or doing something that he or she did not consider to be the right thing, but did it anyway out of fear.

So after many years of hesitation, I reached the conclusion that my research warranted an English translation. My initial intention was to modify the book for an English readership, but in the end I made only a few small changes to the original study so that the context could be better grasped. I would like to invite the reader to explore what causes fear in us and how we can free ourselves from it within the structure of our everyday lives. This will all be examined within the framework of two small Czech schools that went through the final phase of the communist regime, the ferment of the period around the 1989 revolution and the transition to that which we somewhat brazenly call democracy.

1. The transformation of schools viewed through the lens of contemporary theory

Transformation as the creation of a new structure and culture

In this chapter we will attempt to outline how a school's culture, and thus its transformation,¹ related to the transformation of society as a whole, or, in other words, why there is also the need to examine the change of its culture within the context of society's transformation. This starting point is crucial for understanding the research and for interpreting its results.

Now thirty years down the road of the transformation's start, we can look back and reflect upon some of the processes that were not necessarily apparent to us as the transformation was underway. It's not always possible to clearly assess from the ship itself how straight or zigzagging the journey has been, how many obstacles have been avoided, how many times the crew has been disgruntled or pleased with the captain's decisions. This can only be evaluated after a sufficient distance has been covered. I feel that thirty years is long enough to begin to reflect upon the journey taken and learn from what has or has not happened.

Numerous books and articles have been written on the transformation of central and eastern Europe (Kollmorgen, 2011, provides, for instance, a thorough overview of various types of theories and reflects upon their development). As a starting point for my own work, a few main postulates from these books are worth mentioning.

In 1989, when the countries of central and eastern Europe began their transformation process, the pressure from the start was primarily on the

1 The term "transformation" will be used here for the post-1989 period, especially when changes that occurred in society are examined. The term "post-communism" will be used to describe this period. The period up to 1989 will be called "communist" in accordance with the use by Holmes (1997), who argued that though it was not a real communist system, it was the declared objective that the system was striving for.

restructuring of these societies. There was the need to find a safe way to shift from a centrally planned economy to decentralization, to distribute state property among companies and groups of citizens and to change communist legislation into democratic laws, among many other things. Every country took a slightly different path, though the task at hand was similar for all of them.

Yet restructuring is not something that occurs outside the realm of culture and without cultural changes. Successful restructuring also requires cultural changes that are not undertaken after the restructuring is finished. On the contrary, the cultural change, the change in paradigm, the change in how things are done and, above all, a culture's ideas of how things should be done in a new way, are a catalyst for these structural changes. Ideas form in the people's minds of what these new structures should look like; ideas form in a culture of what a new world should look like and what to do with the old one. According to the publications written on this subject, it seems that this very point became problematic and led to, among other things, a certain anomie that societies of central and eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic, are currently experiencing.

After 1989, the societies of central and eastern Europe underwent a transformation phase that Sztompka defines as a change in the society as a whole, and not a partial change within the current society. The great driving force of this change was the desire to westernize, to return to the West (Berend, 2009; Sztompka, 1993). Various writers understood this return to the West in different ways. Sztompka (1993) asks where exactly we're returning to. Is our final destination a European house or a European home? At first glance, the difference between these two words may not be great, but the means by which this return is undertaken is, in his view, radically different. In short, we can move into a European house – get a decree, the right to a flat, gather up our things, load them into trucks and take them there. The formal right to this cannot be questioned; everyone must accept it. However, a return to the European home means assuming the basic responsibilities of this home – not only for its formal existence, but also for its quality. It means a willingness to take part in its development, to negotiate our common interests with neighbors, to tend to our relationships with them and once again to slowly grow together with them. Building a home is work based on minor interactions, symbolic exchanges and a willingness to listen. And yet it seems that some kind of dissonance and disharmony occurred here.

Indeed, culture has a certain inertia. Changing the backdrop – if we can metaphorically express political changes in this way – does not necessarily mean a change in the character of the actors or a change of script. Sztompka (1993) introduces the term “the boomerang effect” to describe this phenomenon. In his view, people adopted behavior prior to 1989 that impeded the development of socialism during the “normalization” period of hard-line communism in the 1970s and 80s, only to have the same type of behavior impede the development of capitalism following 1989. What specific traits were these? Though various authors differ in listing them, they agree on the essential points: People were used to having security, indoctrination, little money and no great risks. Moreover, everyone looked down on people from the business world (Berend, 2009: 198). However, according to Sztompka (1993), building a democratic system requires, above all, a business culture based on, among other things, a willingness to take risks, and a civic culture based on the development of a civic society and civic responsibility, which we will get to later. Prior to 1989 there was no way of practicing these traits or skills, and yet these were the very things needed to build or, rather, rebuild the old world into a new world. So what was to be done?

In the early years, the basic inspiration was the way the established democracies worked in the West. Several factors played a role here. With the fall of the Iron Curtain certain new developments also took place in the West. Some authors even see the start of globalization in the context of this historical moment. Great pressure was placed on expanding existing structures such as the European Union and NATO. This obviously required that the laws and structures in post-communist countries be aligned with the international norm. Yet this international norm arose as a result or product of a certain culture, and differed from that which was the driving force in post-communist countries. Berend (2009: 197) characterizes this fact: “People and their politicians admired the attractive consumerism, ample supply of goods and high living standards, but overlooked the high prices, the work ethic, and the efficiency that created it.” Thus a certain disillusionment with the transformation process took place. Given the great social downturn in the early post-1989 years, the dream of full shops and of the possibility to buy anything began to recede and seemed practically out of reach (Berend, 2009). This downswing arrived in various countries at a different speed – the first economic depression didn’t hit the Czech Republic until after 1997. Nevertheless, the change in the feeling of

social security sooner or later impacted and divided the population into those who were able to grasp the new opportunities and those who weren't. Faith in a rapid change and a rapid obtainment of a Western standard of living began to wobble, and the willingness to undertake structural changes, shaken by this distrust, often merely led to a kind of "Potemkin harmonization" (Berend, 2009) or, in the words of the slogan often used by teachers to describe the reform of the education system, "having your cake and eating it to." (Moree, 2008).

Berend (2009) even speaks of a social shock that he characterizes as a cultural affair. The market economy was forced upon a society that was culturally different. The cultural concept prior to 1989 remained and, combined with the market economy, resulted in something that was unsatisfactory for much of the population.

Another significant matter that remains unresolved is the need for the very linking of the idea of democracy with a market economy. Evident in many writings is a kind of conditioning of one by the other (Berend, 2009). Others, however, do not automatically draw a direct line between a free market and political transformation (Sztompka, 1993).

What about culture then? The thing about culture is that it's always linked to a time, to a certain period. It can change and it is changing, yet this change occurs slowly. Culture changes in a kind of inertia that takes on new forms. Kennedy (2002) even claims that the very process of transformation produced a new culture that was neither totalitarian nor democratic, but transitional. A transition culture is then defined as a "contradiction in the very term. A culture includes values, convictions, symbols and rituals, while a transition is a change in a political and economic system [...] A transition culture is thus a mobilizing culture organized around certain logical and normative oppositions, valuations of expertise, and interpretations of history that provide a basic framework for change." (Kennedy, 2002: 8).

Nevertheless, a culture has many layers and the question is which of its components changes at what rate. Does a culture change as a whole, or is the existence of that which Kennedy (2002) calls a transition culture possible for the very reason that the various components change at a different rate and order?

We know from writings on the subject that the great theme in the transformation process is the change in the value system. The transformation process brought with it two important consequences in this respect. This consisted of a certain **undermining of the value system**, which ceased to provide orientation for everyday life (Holmes, 1997). An oft

repeated premise was that anything would be better than the ways things were run prior to 1989 (Buraway – Verdery, 1999). Often the sentiment that everything must be different was the only thing that everyone agreed on (Dahrendorf, 2005).

The question of trust became an important matter: Who and what could be trusted? The transforming political system no longer provided a clear explanation of the world and for many people the state remained enemy number one. Trust continued to be linked more with personal relations, yet beyond that almost nothing was to be trusted.

Marková (2004) recalls in this context the concept of the *homeless mind*, defined as the feeling of existential solitude and destitution. The homeless mind is not a phenomenon necessarily linked to transformation situations. This term was first introduced by Berger in 1973. “When people began to forge their own individual identities and when their expectations of social recognition of these new identities were not fulfilled, the desired freedom brought with it a feeling of loneliness and isolation.” (Marková, 2004: 17).

This feeling of loneliness probably wouldn’t have been so severe had the people not faced a situation that had no solution *a priori*. Marková (2004) points out that democracy necessarily requires the capacity for dialogue. Yet socialization in the totalitarian² world meant attempting a monologist interpretation of the world that was also changing throughout life just as the totalitarian regime itself was changing. In all of its shapes – whether its more brutal form of the 1950s or in the more moderate one of the late 1980s – there prevailed the feeling that human life is influenced by many factors, of which only a few are predictable and can be influenced. People lived in a double reality (Marková, 2004; Moree, 2008) and could, in Marková’s view, react to it in two ways: either by conforming to it or as part of the dissent. “The safest conformist strategy when dealing with the situation was to avoid any meaningful communication or self-expression, and to refuse any responsibility for one’s world.” (Marková, 2004: 40).

However, building a democracy after 1989 required a willingness to assume responsibility and to be open to dialogue. Given that the engrained ways of behaving and relationships are considerably inert and do not change over the course of a person’s life as quickly as a political

2 I am using in this book the term “totalitarian” to describe the pre-1989 regime, mainly because that is how the respondents spoke about the regime.

regime (Marková, 2004), the post-revolutionary euphoria instead gave way to a feeling of decline, chaos, anomie and solitude.

It was in this vacuum of values that the people's expectations of public figures, of leaders, then radically increased. Society needed to acquire some kind of orientation and, in its instilled helpless way, expected that this orientation would come to them from above (Dahrendorf, 2005; Holmes, 1997).

Consequently, most of the authors agree that a condition for a successful transformation is, above all, a combination of structural changes and cultural changes, changes in people's attitudes and civic harmony, which both enables this change and augments it (Berend, 2009; Holmes, 1997; Kennedy, 2002; Dahrendorf, 2005 and others). Yet several steps first need to be taken before we can start the change in culture. First and foremost, we need to understand the cultural changes that occurred over the past thirty years. Since the society we live in is stratified and consists of many groups, such a change cannot be described in categories covering the entire society. Actually it can, but since we do not presently know enough about the qualitative parameters for such vast research, we first have to focus on a few specific groups that have experienced the change and, only then, after formulating theories, can we further examine using a broader sampling of society and quantitative methods. We therefore need to choose a target group for this preliminary explorative research of a qualitative nature.

If we postulate that a genuine and deep transformation cannot be achieved without a cultural change in the realm of citizenship, we must first contemplate the characteristics of citizenship. We need to know how to characterize the coveted goal of this change and which target groups should be chosen for this exploratory research.

The question at hand is then how do we recognize a person-citizen capable of building a democratic system. Some research conducted in recent years in western countries show the need to distinguish between several aspects of such citizenship. Everyone agrees that a good citizen should be a decent person who obeys the laws. There's little doubt that this is true, yet just being a decent person does not suffice for building a democracy. What is also needed is the ability to imagine how to actively fill the space of the freedom created, and a willingness to become involved on a certain level, to take part in building the world in which we live (Oser – Veugelers, eds., 2008; Veugelers, ed., 2011).

Prior research showed that there are two types of involvement in society. Westheimer writes that there are three types of citizens: a personally

responsible citizen, who will take part in a wide range of voluntary activities and is available to those in distress or facing a difficult situation in life. A participating citizen is, above all, active in society and civic initiatives on a local, regional or state-wide level. A citizen is oriented toward social justice and capable of critical assessment of social, political and economic structures. He or she examines strategies of how to change these structures (Westheimer in Oser – Veugelers, 2008: 20–21).

Besides these measurable parameters of involvement, there are also more subtle levels of citizenship that are no less important for life in a democratic society. Kymlicka (2001) reflected upon how to arrange things so that all citizens in a society felt good. Obviously a certain system – a legal system – needed to be established. But that was not enough to create a good feeling. Something more was needed in his concept, something called *civility*. What does that look like? Not only do I have the right to enter a shop, cinema, pharmacy and the likes, but I also feel good and welcomed there. How is such a feeling created? Through the smile of a shop assistant, through a short, informal chat about the weather or selection of products, by relinquishing one's seat on the tram with a smile and not a disdainful grimace. Civility is formed in the atmosphere and delicate web or relationships in a public space. Yet it also depends on a feeling of security and trust. However, in a transforming society the very undermining of certainties complicates even everyday human civility in a public space.

Although all this may appear banal at first glance, actually doing it requires absolute engagement, an endless ability to reflect upon what is occurring in one's immediate surroundings and well contemplated decision-making. Such behavior needs to be developed in life, and instilled and requires practice. Kymlicka posed the question of where such behavior can be taught so that its further development is guaranteed in society. He came up with two suggestions. One such milieu where people practiced this *civility* could be the civic society organization whose objectives were essentially to create a space for this type of citizenship. Unfortunately, not all civic society organizations are truly democratic; there are a number of associations and movements that are of an undemocratic nature. Moreover, not all citizens unite or even become involved in such organizations. The other possibility is quite logically the school, which should guide students toward becoming citizens in the true meaning of the word. Citizens, who will not only passively observe laws, but also actively take part in building a deeply humane society.

If we accept the premise that schools are crucial for building a civic society and thus also for transforming the entire society, the curtains to

a very tense drama opens before us. Prior to 1989, schools were, at least according to the official documents, the very place where the ideal socialist citizen – the *homo sovieticus* – was to be produced (Kozakiewicz, 1992). They were then suddenly supposed to become a place to create models through which children would learn to create a free society.

Here we encounter a number of possible obstacles and uncertainties. What happens in such a situation to the convictions of teachers? How do they change and why? How do they perceive these changes and how do they change their behavior, their definition of themselves as teachers and their roles in society. What dilemmas does this new situation produce? These seem to be fundamental questions, especially if we take into account that children cannot learn democratic citizenship in an undemocratic environment (Westheimer in Oser – Veugelers, 2008; Banks, 2004). For instance, if a school decides to teach democratic citizenship and the teachers and students do not experience a democratic culture within their microcosm, they most likely won't achieve anything – regardless of the curriculum. The school culture – the fragile web of symbols, rituals, values, relationships and stories (Banks, 2004; Higgins – Sath, 1998; Veugelers, 2007; Peterson – Deal, 2009 and others) – is a decisive factor for practicing civic skills.

The transformation of schools – just like the transformation of a society – must take place in synchronicity with many different processes. The restructuring and change of a culture are a necessary condition (Fullan, 2000; Holmes, 1997). This process of change then is not typical just for post-communist countries. A revision of education's place in the lives of western societies has been ongoing over the past fifty years. In this sense, we are not alone on this trek, but belong to a specific thought current that reflects the fermentation of contemporary times in education (Giroux – McLaren, eds. 1989; Veugelers, ed. 2011).

Owing to the random composition of teachers and students (or parents) that represent various groups living in one area, schools reflect events in the broader society (Kutsyuruba, 2011). This provides us with an ideal sample for researching the transformation.

In the mirror of changes of the school culture we can try to describe what happened in our world and, above all, where to focus on its further development. Yet before anything else, we should take a look at two aspects that are crucial for understanding the monitored research: the school culture and the transformation of the educational system in the Czech Republic.

An educational system at the crossroads between the past and the future

We understand transformation as the movement from one state of things to another. It therefore makes sense to begin then with what we know for certain about the educational system prior to 1989.

The main goal of education was uniform: to produce a socialist citizen. This goal was declared both in the methodological materials for teachers and in the textbooks themselves. We see this, for instance, in a didactic and methodological book for first-form students: “The pupils should acquire the first simple, age-adequate ideas of our socialist society and the foundation for the development of socialist and international sentiments.” (Tupý – Vlčková – Nečesaná – Dušková, 1975: 8). In the foreword to a civics textbook for the sixth grade of basic school, this goal is explained: “You are learning that the basis for all wealth and development of our country is the sacrificial and dignified work of the people, who, under the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, are building a socialist society. You are understanding that the main guarantee for the construction of this society are educated, expertly prepared, politically conscious and active citizens.” (Jelínková – Prusáková, 1988: 7).

The entire educational system was subordinate to this goal: The state had absolute control over the individual types of schools (Kozakiewicz, 1992) – there were no private schools or schools affiliated with a religion. The state also had control over the teaching curriculum (Tomusk, 2001). This also obviously meant complete control over books (Cerych, 1997; Kozakiewicz, 1992; Szebenyi, 1992; Walterová – Greger, 2006). If we wanted for the sake of clarity to put this extent of control in numbers we’d only have to glimpse the list of writers taught in literature textbooks for the 4th year of secondary schools from 1978, 1987 and 2004. After 1989, the list increased by nearly forty names and many other writers were removed from the list (see Moree, 2008). Forbidden literature also obviously existed. But it is interesting that many claim that there was no official list of such literature. Urbášek (2011: 460), for instance, states that lists of forbidden writers were read out at meetings, but that no one was allowed to take notes. Everyone had “to know”, who they were not allowed to quote or otherwise refer to.

Prior to 1989, the educational system was based mainly on apprentice schools – as late as 1990 over 60% of children ended up at secondary vocational schools (Berend, 2009: 227).

In addition to this control over the structure and content, available information shows that the state also attempted to maintain control over the loyalty of teachers, which is why applicants to the teachers' college had to be thoroughly screened (Ulc, 1978).

The chance to further one's education was a prominent topic during communism, as was the extent to which a family's political profile influenced this possibility. Both teachers and students had to deal with this. In cases of children from working-class families, positive discrimination, as Urbášek tersely calls it in the book by Vaněk et al. (2011), was applied. Wong (1998: 16) maintains that by doing so "the Czechoslovak Communist Party contributed to the active stratification of society and to the generational imbalance." The employment of the parents at the time did not influence this selection (e.g. many of the Charta 77 signatories were blue-collar workers); the proletarian lineage of the ancestors was decisive.

We have relatively detailed knowledge of the situation at universities where, according to Urbášek (in Vaněk, 2011), teachers in the 1970s were divided into four groups based on political reliability. The most reliable had a relatively open door to a career; the less reliable could not achieve a higher title than doctorate of science. Faster promotions or at least security was provided to those willing to take part in building the regime in the form of, for instance, communist party membership.

Finding clear proof of this is very complicated since the guidelines and other such documents for choosing applicants for various types of schools were carefully concealed. Exceptions do, however, appear. More specific information was published in the 1970s in the exile periodical *Listy* (December 1974). We read here that those applying to study at law schools were divided into five categories: 1) communist party members; 2) those whose parents are party members; 3) children of important representative of other parties; 4) children with a proletarian lineage and 5) others. The fifth category did not include children of former communist party members, because their parents had already demonstrated a lack of loyalty to the regime.

The question arises of how the teachers acted in this constricted system. In every regime, education represents a primary socialization tool and respondents are found who avowedly admit that education was under considerable supervision (Urbášek, 2011). Totalitarianism imposed on teachers' requirements concerning their everyday actions and there was no way of avoiding them. Teachers were constantly having to resolve some kind of dilemma – if their convictions did