Jiří Přibáň & Karel Hvížďala

In Quest of History

On Czech Statehood and Identity

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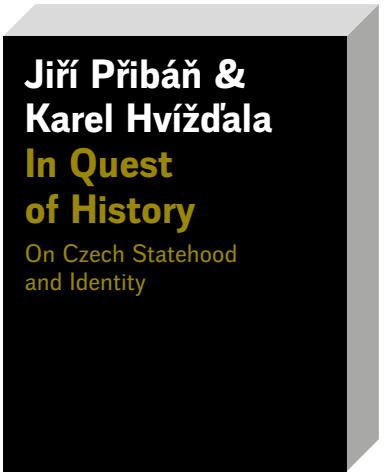

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Let us then seek as those who would find, and find as those who would seek.
St Augustine of Hippo

The purpose of history as a science is to enrich and expand human consciousness.
Zdeněk Kalista

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PREFACE

That we are experiencing a cultural watershed is growing into a refrain for our times. Globalisation has assimilated individual national societies into a single world society that we all share. There is no escape from this society; it has become our destiny. We share hopes and fears, technological advances that are groundbreaking and unprecedented in human history, and the classic political, economic and ecological crises that have been dogging us since the dawn of history.

In this global society, modern nations and their states are rapidly and radically evolving, yet remain, in the minds of those who belong to them, an imaginary community where moral ideals and political goals are pursued and attained. For some, the nation state is a tool of globalisation; others see it as a last-chance emergency brake before we crash into globalisation's calamitous fallout.

People are clamouring against the march of global civilisation, but are forced to react to it both within and outside their national cultures because it cannot be pushed aside or sidestepped. We can also see this in the emerging generation's protests and political engagement: unlike the older generation of rapidly globalising professional classes, they believe that global risks are just as serious as the local defence of democracy in their own country. Similar threads run throughout our civilisation: in France and Germany there are the Greens, in the Czech Republic the Pirates and A Million Moments for Democracy, in Hong Kong the student movement, and so on.

Central Europe is a place whose modern history has spawned more cultural watersheds than its inhabitants have been able to cope with by civilised means. The history of the Czech nation and its statehood is no exception. Historians and politicians, idealists and realists, democrats and their enemies all seek to understand these watersheds. Everyone is on a quest for history, even if their minds are set on the present and future. This is also true of our dialogue between a legal philosopher living in Cardiff and a probing journalist from Prague.

While the internet has foisted this idea on today's globalised humanity that speed and concise communication are paramount, we have headed in the opposite direction in this book: we try to amplify the context both territorially and temporally. In our republic's centenary year, we concentrated on key points in our history, ranging from the 9th to the 21st century. This allowed us to peer into the past and ask ourselves how we perceived and understood our history at different times, why this was so, and what it means for our present and future.

In certain respects, this is a quest to stop history from being reduced to a screen on which we project our frustrations. We were keen to return to the public arena those issues that tend to be contained within the walls of academia or that we generally steer clear of.

We extend our gratitude to Pavel Kolář, a comparative historian from the European University Institute in Florence, and Jan Kuklík, a legal historian and the dean of the Faculty of Law at Charles University in Prague, for their valuable advice and comments on the manuscript.

We would like to thank Petr Valo, the director of the Karolinum Press, and his deputies Martin Janeček and Milan Šusta for giving us the impetus to write this book.

KH and JP, 2018

History and National Identity

Karel Hvížďala: Czechoslovakia was proclaimed an independent state on 28 October 1918, yet in the century since there have been only two periods when it was truly master of its own fate: from the time it came into being until 1938, and then post 1989. At the end of 1992, it split into two separate states. If we are serious about discussing the history of Czech statehood and Czech identity, we should perhaps start by taking a look at the first historically documented beginnings of the Bohemian medieval state, which would take us back to the 9th century and the baptism of Duke Bořivoj. I firmly believe that our current gripes and grumbles are rooted far in the past. Can this be attributed to historical events and facts per se, or rather to how they have been interpreted in the accounts we call history?

Jiří Přibáň: National identity, its historical origins, and the political autonomy of each of these themes would make for a work spanning numerous volumes. And each of those volumes could stir up untold heated debates. Nationalism, for instance, can be defined quite simply as an ideology that demands the reconciliation of ethnic and political boundaries and legitimises power via the principle of popular sovereignty, in which the rulers and the rest of society together shape their integral national unity. Note, though, how many political and cultural ideals and disputes hide behind this definition and how this definition has been manifested in the history of various nations. History, including national history, then primarily becomes a matter of storytelling about the past. Through those narratives and stories, we pass on everything that we consider important in our history and that we believe gives it meaning. I am fond of the puristically conceived word *dějepis* [loosely "event-writing"] that we use in Czech to translate *historia*, the Greek term that originally meant a general capacity to become cognisant, through a narrative, of what has been learned. *Histor* generally designated a learned or wise man.

The Czech *dějepis* mirrors that original inner dynamic, where the historian's task is to write down past events and the expectation is that this very description, in itself, is an event and hence forms part of the history from which we should learn and enlighten ourselves. Consequently, unlike Latin's neutralised *historia,* the Czech *dějepis* continues to remind us that every historical narrative is self-referential, by which I mean that, ultimately, it always folds back on itself as part of history, the historical narrative, and the wisdom attached to history. History is the process of hauling yesteryear into the present so that past events acquire meaning and purpose for the current generation. National history has that and more: it is imbued with numerous existential questions such as "who are we?", "where do we come from?", and "where are we going?", which are pivotal, and all the more dangerous for it, because they also conjure up the illusion that nations are special, chosen to take on humanity's historical tasks, and that they have been here since time immemorial as natural groupings of people whose claim to their own existence takes precedence over any other right of an individual or group, or even of any other nation. Likewise, history routinely creates the illusion that the state is some sort of eternal political institution in which a nation finds and confirms its own existence and identity. In point of fact, the state is a product of modern politics, and the nation is an imaginary community devised by political romantics in the modern industrial age. Were every nation to exercise an unconditional right to self-determination in its own state, total political chaos and anarchy would ensue on a global scale.

To be sure, we tend to forget that today's nations are a product of the 19th century, and yet we see politicians in the Czech Republic and surrounding countries increasingly talking about the nation, national interests and national sovereignty as though this were something eternal, ancient beyond memory. What are our chances of extracting ourselves from this trap?

If we are to understand the historical processes behind the formation of the state and the birth of modern nations organising themselves politically into nation states, we must dispense with grand ideologies and established doctrines and, instead, study the specific language and lexicon used by society to describe its own history. Rather than concentrating on general patterns and abstract concepts, we should turn our attention to the specific speech that has been employed and the peculiar forms of power that are associated with it. Words are weapons and the past is littered with countless examples of how historical narratives become battlefields. The modern history of nation states eloquently documents this knack of bygone times to fashion myths and, by then invoking them, to foment wars and mobilise entire populations. This is precisely why we need to stop trying to find any objective rhyme or reason in the course of history, to stop searching for some *Weltgeist* of humanism manifesting itself in the process of human civilisation, or any other straitjackets laced up by philosophy as it seeks to understand human history. The idea that, in history, we will discover some transcendental principle in the form of progress, freedom, reason or humanity is untenable. Instead of the speculative philosophy of history familiar, say, to 19th-century national revivalists or revolutionary Marxists, we need to ponder particular historical situations and periods that may be construed as significant junctions where various relations between the structure of society and its semantics intersect. In other words, it is necessary to understand the processes underlying how society both organises and describes itself. Observe, for example, how modern Western societies describe their structures in crystal-clear terms, such as the state, the nation or sovereignty, while at the same time infusing them with equally clean-cut ideals, such as freedom, equality and fraternity. Our job is to peel back this "clean" description to lay bare the "dirty" and intricate world of economic, pedagogical, moral or legal structures and the most diverse technologies of power. This distinction between "clean" and "dirty" history cannot be viewed in

any moral or philosophical sense, by which I mean we cannot uncover any true essence of history and figure out how it works and where it's headed. That sort of moralism would be as unseemly as any speculative philosophy of history. What we do need to do, though, is expose even the contemporary "dirty" language and lexicon within the seemingly "clean" structures and concepts we use to describe our history. The aim is to grasp how, even under the surface of apparently unambiguous, accepted concepts in the history of modern society and politics, there are always specific conflicts with smudged contours and historically haphazard processes and consequences.

But such considerations are too complicated. Politicians and the media shun them, afraid of alienating voters, readers or listeners. And that flings the door open wide to power-hungry populists and fabulists who have simple pre-cooked solutions for any problem. The internet has helped this shift and decay by marginalising debate with a barrage of emotionally-charged sound bites. Instead of the collective, it gives life to the connective…

The paradox of modern society is that its life is influenced far more by future expectations than past experience and tradition, yet its hunger for historical stories, and thirst for their moral significance, continues to mount. The social predominance of expectations over experience, then, also increases the specific expectation that history has answers to the questions posed by the present. Even the famous end-of-history thesis written by the Russian-born French philosopher Alexandre Kojéve and retold by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama after 1989 as a historic victory of liberal democracy is nothing more than an attempt to decipher the definitive meaning of human history. Although Fukuyama's thesis provoked the ire of both the left and the right, blazing from their respective ideological positions, I think its most problematic factor is that, in Popper's words, it is merely another example of the "poverty of historicism". Nevertheless, if we were to say that there are no metaphys-