

ALTERNATIVE CULTURE IN A SOCIALIST CITY: PUNKERS AND LONG-HAIRED PEOPLE IN PRAGUE IN THE 1980S¹

MICHAELA PIXOVÁ

Abstract: Cities in socialist Czechoslovakia were meant to constitute the setting for an ideal socialist society. The dogmatic embracement of this objective by the ruling Communist Party eventuated in complete intolerance towards any manifestation of free-thinking or alleged opposition to socialism. Starting in the 1960s, part of the Czechoslovak youth were inspired by the Western countercultural hippie movement and the Beat generation, as well as by punk subculture beginning in the 1970s. These people openly displayed their alienation from the official culture by disrupting the established societal standards of appearance, behaviour, and leisure activities. The State Security saw them as ideologically biased, labelling them as the *defected youth* in an effort to eradicate their presence from the public space and separate them from other citizens.

As Czechoslovakia's capital and biggest city, Prague had the highest concentration of people inspired by Western countercultures. Their appearance, activities, and cultural production provoked the conformist society, and led to the regime's hostility and repressions. Unlike Western countercultures, which were based on political protest against their respective regimes, Czechoslovak alternative groups inspired by these countercultures were, in most cases, rather apolitical. In a time of post-1968 normalization, their anti-regime opposition originated mainly in the attempts of the totalitarian state to normalize their cultural aspirations. This paper explores the ways in which the context of socialist Prague affected the practices and routines employed by the fans of alternative culture throughout the 1980s, resulting in their antagonistic relation towards the totalitarian regime.

Key words: socialist city, urban society, alternative culture, totality, punkers, long-haired people.

¹ The article was made possible within the frame of the research project MSM 0021620831 "Geographical systems and risk processes in context of global changes and European integration" conducted by the Faculty of Science, Charles University in Prague, and coordinated by Prof. Luděk Sýkora.

Introduction

Under totalitarian rule, the socialist city of Prague exhibited little diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality or religion; most people were white, Czech or Slovak, nonreligious, and dressed in a way that reflected the scarcity of a centrally planned economy and a lack of imported goods. There were nonetheless, also groups of people who disrupted the dominant style of the masses – people inspired by Western countercultures, who’s “norms, values, symbolic references, and style of life deviate from those of the dominant culture” (Binkley 2007: 809). Countercultures contradict and oppose mainstream society, and challenge its status quo. In this paper I am focusing on the Czechoslovak youth inspired by countercultures that emerged in the West during the Cold War era, such as the hippie culture, the Beat generation, punk, etc. In the West, the groups that deviated from the mainstream society were conceptualised as *subcultures*, and their politically active fractions stood in opposition as *countercultures*. In totalitarian Czechoslovakia such distinction was not obvious; Vaněk notes (2002a) that even ordinary hobbies or cultural and social activities, which democratic regimes normally consider apolitical, were regarded oppositional by the regime (ibid.: 2002a: 7). In the 1980s, during the continued post-1968 reconsolidation of the ties with the socialistic block, two distinct alternative styles, long-haired people and punkers, were seen as dangerous symptoms of ideo-diversion and a potential threat to the status quo. The authorities tried to eliminate these alternative influences and restrict their dissemination, which turned many young people against the regime. The unfree choice of culture, appearance and leisure time activities often grew into an anti-regime resistance with specific countercultural features.

Western capitalist societies treated alternative cultures differently and eventually accommodated them through commoditization as an integral part of the society (see Heath – Potter 2004). Cities became places where rebellion could be consumed in music clubs, concert halls, subcultural shops, bars, etc., which neutralized young people’s desire to revolt and challenge the society. Czechoslovak cities on the other hand failed to provide its youth with the kind of consumer goods, entertainment, sensation and self-realization it had wanted. Prague under totalitarian rule lost its cultural diversity and the regime deemed Western alternative trends as dangerous and offensive attempts of the imperialist enemies to influence the socialistic youth. Cities, Prague especially, turned into sites of an enduring war led by the authorities on alternative styles of people who might have been relatively harmless for the status quo. Most of them just wanted to escape the routine of their parents’ lifestyle, and experience excitement in boring gray cities. The regime failed to comprehend that the Western influences admired by the Czechoslovak youth were based in countercultural movements aimed against imperialist establishments. The opportunity to embrace this interest and to consolidate the power of the socialist ideology was

wasted. By contrast, strict repressions against alternative culture led to many young people's politicization and to the radicalization of their oppositional stance towards the political establishment and life under socialism. Instead of becoming integrated, pursuers of alternative cultures adopted various practices and routines which allowed them to create their own parallel world of unofficial culture.

Because of the antagonistic relationship between the regime and alternative culture, the State Security labelled young pursuers as the *defected youth* and spied on their activities and monitored them (Žáček 2002). Police patrols attempted to banish from public spaces people whose appearance and manners did not conform to the generally recognized standards; they used to stop them, search them, and sometimes arrest them (see Vaněk 2002b; 2010; Fuchs 2002). Other authorities attempted to push alternative looking people out of various institutions and out of public life in general. Bureaucracy and conformist employees of the state impeded their access to certain types of education and employment. Exposition of alternative culture in media and official cultural institutions was restricted or prohibited, and unofficial concerts and gatherings were frequently dispersed by the police. The hostility of the authorities was further reinforced by the abomination of the wider public, which disapproved of youthful rebellion against traditional values and practices. The disapproval of the older generation was further fostered by the regime for the purpose of justifying its oppressive and repressive practices against the alternative youth (see Fuchs 2002; Pospíšil – Blažek 2010). As a result, both the private and the public sphere of life of people pursuing alternative culture were affected.

This paper uses the example of Prague in the era of the 1980s to review the specific environment of a socialist city under totalitarian rule, and to explore the conditions that the people pursuing alternative culture were exposed to in this specific context. By looking at the practices and routines that pursuers of alternative culture employed in order to deal with the various restrictions and limitations, it provides insight into the unofficial world that these people created in order to retain their culture and escape from the dreariness and oppressiveness of the totalitarian city. They reveal the ways in which such environment influenced originally apolitical people, who were indulging in alternative styles that the regime deemed ideologically undesirable, and also how this environment served as a matrix in which local alternative culture gained certain countercultural characteristics.

Research sources and methods

Since the emergence of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s, urban subcultures and countercultures, especially the American youth countercultural movements of the 1960s, and the British post-war music subcultures, have received extensive attention from Anglo-American academia. Being also subject to numerous urban

studies, researchers have also focused on their position and spatial practices in cities and their specific role in urban environment (Ley 1996; Florida 2002; Chatterton – Hollands 2003; Shaw 2006; Zukin 2010). In cities shaped by capitalism alternative cultures are often subject to economic marginalization and constrained to spaces in disinvested and de-industrialized parts of the city that are not in demand by the dominant culture. Alternative cultures have the ability to improve the image of such areas and turn them into attractive cosmopolitan urban areas. Due to that they are often exploited for market purposes and gentrification (Ley 1996; Shaw 2006; Zukin 2010). In cities undergoing corporatization of culture and urban development alternative cultures are therefore bound to fight for their survival (Uitermark 2004; Pruijt 2004; Chatterton – Hollands 2003; Pickerill – Chatterton 2006).

Until the fall of the totalitarian rule, Czech alternative cultures did not receive any academic attention. The contemporary ones have been studied by social scientists (Mareš 2003; Smolík 2010; Kolářová 2011), while the ones that existed in former Czechoslovakia under totalitarian conditions were retrospectively researched by historians (Vaněk 2002a; 2010) and anthropologists (Blažek – Laube – Pospíšil 2003; Pospíšil – Blažek 2010), whose research methods employed oral history and archive research. Various aspects of Czechoslovak alternative culture between 1945–1989 were subject to sociological and cultural-historical interpretations (Alan 2001), and valuable information was collected in the form of non-academic anthologies (Fuchs 2002) and other forms of historical collections (Stárek – Kostúr 2010), and personal memoirs.

So far no research has dealt with the urban condition of alternative culture in a socialist city under totalitarian rule, which is a gap that this paper attempts to fill by focusing on the role this context played in influencing Prague's alternative culture and its position within the city. The research methods included a survey of literature, both academic and non-academic, as well as other available documents and printed media. The aim of this survey was to obtain information about the routines, practices and spaces used by people pursuing alternative culture and to analyze the interrelations between the context of their life in a city and the development of their anti-regime stance. The survey was further enriched through oral history of ten narrators. The method was not applied in the traditional form of biographical narration, but rather in the form of semi-structured interviews with open questions focused on particular moments and aspects of the narrators' youth in socialist Prague. The selected number of narrators was not based on pre-defined quotes, as there are no reliable estimates of the number of people involved with alternative culture. Selected narrators were punkers or long-haired people, two most common examples of alternative culture in Prague in the 1980s. While some of them experienced residing in Prague in the 1970s, most of them were too young at that time, and therefore the research focused on their experience from the 1980s. The selection of seven narrators was drawing from my personal connections and from my previous research (Pixová 2007; 2011), and three narrators were found by employing

the snow-ball method. The youngest narrator was forty-one years old and the oldest fifty-seven. In the text, the narrators appear under coded names accompanied by the narrators' age and their cultural identity. Four narrators were punkers – Roman 43, Luboš 45, Adam 49, and David 53. Six narrators wore long hair – Radek 41, Petr 45, Dominik 50, Honza 50, Zbyšek 56, Miloslav 57. Before 1989, six narrators were members or managers of various music groups, two were students, and two were directly involved with the dissidents. While all of the punk narrators were born in Prague, three of the long-haired narrators moved to Prague from other Czechoslovak cities as young adults. Six interviews were conducted in person, and four by using Skype. The empirical data needed for the purposes of this paper became saturated relatively quickly, as the experience that the narrators were exposed to during their lives in socialist Prague was very similar. On the other hand, their individual experience of various specifics of alternative culture that was beyond the scope of this paper was far richer. Bigger differences also became evident as regards the narrators' overall sentiment about the past era, which to a large extent depends on their current attitude towards the contemporary status quo of the society. All narrators were critical towards the totalitarian past, however, while some of them judge the era from a position completely uncritical towards the contemporary regime, others claimed that their life in a socialist city was in many ways better. The stance of the members of Czechoslovak alternative culture towards the totalitarian past and towards the contemporary capitalist regime would, however, provide an interesting topic for a separate study.

Selected alternative cultures in socialist Prague

In socialist Czechoslovakia, there were two most distinct groups influenced by Western alternative cultures:

Long-haired people

Long-haired people, further referred to by the Czech slang term *mánička*, were people inspired by the music and style of the American countercultural movements of the Beat generation and hippies. They emerged in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. The practitioners wore long hair,² beards and unconventional clothes, listened to rock music, and publicly demonstrated their mental freedom and protest against the established orders by means of their appearance and spontaneous behaviour. The authorities regarded them as unclean and their mere presence in public was therefore considered offensive (Pospíšil – Blažek 2010). Many *máničky* were involved in the

² Pospíšil and Blažek (2010) say that in the 1960s it might have been any hair length reaching over the top of one's ears (2010). By the 1980s longer hair became somewhat fashionable among the mainstream society and only considerably long hair combined with a particular ragged image might have led to problems with the authorities.

unofficial platform of prohibited cultural production known as *Czech underground*, whose activities and gatherings were held in well-hidden spaces. *Czech underground* was involved in dissenting activities and participated in the preparation of the anti-communist document known as *Charter 77*. Many members of *Czech underground* were imprisoned or sent to exile and the regime became even more hostile towards all alternative culture, making unofficial concerts and other activities even harder to organize. However, many *máničky* wore long hair for completely apolitical reasons, mainly due to their preference of particular alternative music.

Punkers

At the end of 1970s, Czechoslovak alternative culture was enriched by a new youth movement from the UK and the US. Punk was a style that evolved around fast rock music with nihilist lyrics and a contemptuous attitude towards conventions, class society, bourgeoisie, and conservative imperialist politics. In relation to the regime, Czechoslovak punkers were ideologically less oppositional than their Western counterparts or *Czech underground*. They were mostly smitten with a new type of alternative music and ferocious visual stylization, such as the colourful *mohawk*³ hairstyle or spiky hair, torn clothes, chains etc. Generally, they knew little about the political implications embedded in the more sophisticated fraction of the punk movement in the West (Pixová 2011); anarchy was seen only as a symbolic denial of the regime and of the conventions, and not a platform for systematic political organizing (Mareš 2003). According to Fuchs (2002) the radicalism of *Czech underground* in the 1970s ensured that the regime initially tolerated punk music as a harmless form of alternative rock. That changed in 1983, when an ideological magazine *Tribuna* published an article warning against the dangers that punk subculture allegedly posed to the socialistic society. The whole scene then came under the target of the regime; its repressive tactics eventually drove young Czechoslovak punkers into opposition (Vaněk 2002a; Fuchs 2002; Smolík 2010).

Totalitarian Prague: breeding ground for culture in resistance

Under socialism Prague was gray and smoky city full of construction sites. It was less visited by foreign tourists and less dominated by commerce and cars. The historic core served residential purposes, while at the same time being the main zone for the locals' shopping activities and cultural life. Retailers, pubs and restaurants were scarce, had a limited choice of consumer goods, and their highest concentration was in the core. Due to the shortage economy most heritage buildings were dilapidating, frequently abandoned or used as storages. The historic core was surrounded by industrialized neighbourhoods. There were no rich neighbourhoods; the ones that had been built

³ Hairstyle with both sides of the head shaven, and a strip of longer hair in the middle.

during prior to socialism had their villas separated into several households, and were mostly inhabited by the Communist Party loyalists. New construction was restricted to peripheral areas, where high density multi-storey residential buildings were built (see Sýkora 2009).

The urban form of Prague under socialism was distinctly different from cities which are democratic and driven by capitalism, but so too was Prague's demographic structure and people's everyday lives, including the way in which they encountered and used the city. People's daily routines evolved around regular jobs, and for people of a productive age, it was prohibited to be unemployed unless suffering from health problems. Cultural life and a wide range of leisure activities took place within the range of various institutions supervised by the authorities. Unconventional activities and cultural production that the state could not control were regarded with suspicion and disapproval. The few places, where people had a certain amount of freedom, depending on the personality of the innkeeper, were pubs. Most of them closed at 10 p.m.; night life, the way we know it in contemporary cities, did not exist and people walking around the city during night hours were often targeted by the police.

Due to the adverse state of human rights and freedoms, but also the absence of capitalist market and economic inequalities, alternative culture in socialist Prague existed in a very specific context of various limitations and restrictions. Due to this context it gained certain countercultural features, but at the same time remained distinctly different from the Western countercultures that had inspired it. In the following sub-chapters I will outline the most important aspects of the unofficial world of alternative culture, specifically its dissemination and production, repressions by police and the State Security, and the specifics of its pursuers' life on the societal margins. Then I will outline how the environment of socialist Prague shaped local alternative culture and its position within the city differently than in Western cities.

Unofficial world of alternative culture

In socialist Prague, people interested in music or fashion other than that commonly available, had limited access to information and cultural productions from the West, and limited freedom in disseminating their own cultural production; the regime took precautions against influences outside of its control being imported and disseminated inside socialistic Czechoslovakia. Due to trade and import regulations, a lack of individual freedom, and ideological censorship, Prague had no official infrastructure to serve the fans of alternative culture. There were no alternative clubs or retailers selling alternative products. Recording studios did not produce alternative music. Alternative music groups had limited access to established cultural institutions. There was no literature or other media that would openly and without bias inform about new alternative styles in music and culture.

Smuggling, illegal markets, and the art of “do-it-yourself”

The city of Prague was not impermeably isolated from foreign influences; a limited number of records, clothes, and magazines from abroad were smuggled into the country, either from the West, or from other socialist countries such as Hungary, Poland, or East Germany, where the regimes were less restrictive towards alternative culture, even allowing for occasional concerts by famous Western music groups. Punker David recalled how difficult it had been to assemble one's alternative appearance:

Well, clothes... nobody was able to buy a leather moto jacket here. That used to be smuggled from outside or maybe from Hungary or Poland. The same for [Doc] Martens boots and other stuff... You could buy records at an illegal market that I used to go to. In the eighties, there was a market every Sunday, for example in the Letná gardens above the river bank. Once in a while the police dispersed it, and it got together again – usually somewhere else, for example in the Rieger gardens, the wood in Krč or in Motol, etc. (punker David, 53)

In mid-1980s, punker David was a university student who occasionally earned extra money and could afford to travel to Budapest or buy expensive records at the illegal market. Younger punkers on the other hand had less money and experience. They relied on people who had access to smuggled products. Adam described the way the two groups used to cooperate:

You knew the big bands only from posters and records... you couldn't go to their concert. At that time, not everyone had a video recorder and it was completely normal for us to go to five or six apartments in Prague that had it. It was either arranged in advance or you could dare to bother those people whenever you felt like it. They were sometimes older, had families, but they had the video recorder, and they had tons of tapes, the beta tapes, and you could borrow any thinkable music. The people I knew were those mánička types [with long hair] which didn't attract me much, but at home they had contemporary stuff from abroad - concerts of English and American punk bands, and associated movies. Those people had rough family lives, because every day about five, if not fifteen people came into their house and they all wanted something. (punker Adam, 49)

In the 1980s, Adam was a young man who had a lot of time to hang out in other people's apartments and devote most of his time to his love for alternative music. He could not buy any cultural products and the moments of experiencing alternative cultural production in other people's apartments were essential for his alternative identity. Long-haired Miloslav, who was an artist in his thirties, nostalgically described the adventure of participating in illegal art events:

There used to be illegal art exhibitions on the Střelecký Island. Sometimes the cops didn't even notice, they didn't have any technology to monitor it. But sometimes they arrived and stopped it. I experienced three of four exhibitions, paintings were hanging on the trees. Anybody could bring their stuff. (mánička Miloslav, 57)

Testimonies from the era show that people developed many collaborative and creative techniques that allowed them to gain access to the products of alternative culture. They were exchanging music recordings, videos, clothes and pictures from foreign magazines. Across Prague, illegal art exhibitions and markets – the so-called *burza* – were held, usually on Sundays. Vaněk (2010: 181) says that *burza* was a meeting point of the most informed fans, and a peculiar communication channel for coordinating the distribution of inaccessible products. Miloslav and David described the necessity of holding these illegal events in shrubby natural areas to hide them from the police. Records in *burza* were expensive; people copied them and sold them again. Apartments of the more experienced fans served as important points of contact with music recordings and other related material for the younger generation. In general, alternative culture in socialist Prague was distinguished by various “do-it-yourself” techniques; young people sewed their own outfits, dissidents reproduced illegal publications (the so called *samizdat*), etc. While punkers David or Adam now tend to perceive this cultural poverty as a negative thing, *mánička* Miloslav misses the spontaneity, authenticity and cooperativeness of that era, mainly due to his current disesteem for capitalism and its consumer approach towards culture.

Pubs – points of new encounters and cultural exchange

Many exchanges of information and products of alternative culture took place in pubs. As mentioned above, pubs provided certain freedoms, especially if the innkeepers were not allied with the regime. Beer was a tasty and cheap reason to spend long hours with other people alike and forget about the hardship of the era. *Mánička* Honza belonged to the populous group of punkers and long-haired people that went to pubs almost every day, often right after work. According to his account, different pubs had different regular visitors on different days. In the absence of internet and mobile phones, this more or less constant schedule enabled people to use pubs as the main centres of encounters, communication, and coordination of further activities:

I used to meet the guys from my town in two pubs; we spent Mondays in Klamovka – that is where the underground people used to go, and on Thursdays we met at U Jirásků in Vinohrady. Almost all other days I went to U Zpěváků, which is where I got to know the people in punk and new wave bands. (mánička Honza, 50)

Honza implied that certain pubs had been more popular among long-haired people, others among punkers. Honza was (and still is) a passionate musician, and often visited also the pubs where the two groups mixed and established cooperation. Thanks to pubs it was possible for Honza to form music bands and organize shows and rehearsals. They were also places where information about secret events was spread. Many people chose pubs as places for exchanging literature, *samizdats* etc. As a result, excessive consumption of alcohol became an inherent prerequisite for one's alternative lifestyle in the city.

Music shows

For punkers and *máničky*, music shows were of the utmost importance. Most alternative music groups had to perform outside of official cultural institutions due to their political background or their refusal to cooperate with the official bureaucracy. The most interesting concerts were unauthorised concerts held outside of Prague, in villages and the countryside, which were less controlled by the regime. People from Prague and other cities willingly commuted to these places by trains and buses. Concerts were held in barns, pubs, restaurants, and ballrooms, often under the cover of other events such as weddings, celebrations, etc. The venues kept changing in order to escape the attention of the State Security, but many events were still discovered and raided. When describing the way unofficial concerts were organized, punker Roman admitted that punkers, who had been younger, fewer, and less experienced, had often enjoyed the support and protection of *máničky* and dissidents:

I would say that about 80% of events where punk bands performed were organized by 'máničky' or dissidents. That's because there weren't many punkers, and they usually weren't capable and experienced enough to organize something 'bigger' completely on their own. (punker Roman, 43)

Roman, who himself had a music band at that time, had a special preference for events held in the countryside, as those were usually some of the most subversive events. Music shows, however, took place in Prague too. Due to the regime's strict ideological censorship and police control, alternative music shows were relatively scarce, as were the number of official music venues in the socialist city. The most popular venues were the clubs *Junior klub Na Chmelnici* in Prague 3, *Klub 007* in the dormitories of the Technical College in Strahov, and the amateur club *U Zábranských*. Concerts were also held in district cultural centres. None of these venues were designated specifically for alternative music. In order to perform in official venues, musicians needed permits, issued by the state cultural committee, as proof of the musicians' political soundness. In the 1980s, some punk groups were willing to conform to the requirements of the authorities in order to be able to perform in official ways, which required negotiating with the bureaucrats, signing a contract with organizers, and replaying their repertoires to committees. Occasionally the officials inclined towards alternative music (Haubert 2010: 71), in other cases fake lyrics, fake band names and made up repertoires were submitted. The only organization, which organized concerts without submitting music groups to censorship, was *Jazzová sekce (The Jazz Section)*, an official, although politically uncomfortable volunteer organization that used to import Western alternative music to socialistic Czechoslovakia under the cover of being a union of jazz supporters. The organization was abolished by the regime in 1984. The narratives of Roman and Dominik imply that organizing concerts in various semi-official and semi-legal ways remained a widespread practice, associated with uncertainty and a potential threat of police or State Security intervention:

At that time, many concerts were 'semi-official', which meant that something was getting organized, but the person, which according to the regulations of that time was supposed to be notified, was in fact given only partial or misrepresented information. (punker Roman, 43)

Going to concerts was quite adventurous, we often had to think in advance whether to go or not, whether there was going to be a raid or not. (mánička Dominik, 50)

Shows of alternative music, whether official or unofficial, often ended up dispersed by the police. In a position of a visitor, Dominik experienced raids pre-planned by the State Security, due to which concerts had to be cancelled last minute. Other concerts were raided on the basis of disorderly conduct, which was defined in by-law § 202, authorizing the banishment of people from public premises due to trivial misdemeanours such as unconventional appearances or unusual style of dancing. That was often the case with semi-official concerts; according to Roman, who himself participated in the organization of such shows, the authorities did not learn about the real cultural program until the actual performance. Some were tolerant, others called the police. Police raids then often involved physical and verbal attacks against participants, detainment, interrogation and terrorization at police stations, as well as other forms of punishment.

Police repressions and the State Security

In socialist Prague, targeting people with unconventional appearance or behaviour was an important part of the agenda of the police and the State Security, typically involving a thorough cross-check of personal documents, unscrupulous interrogation, diatribes, reprehending, and sometimes even violent aggression and various forms of arbitrary punishment. Members of alternative groups were exposed to such practices almost everywhere in the city. There were different ways in which people dealt with this elevated attention, e.g. Zbyšek, who is rather anxious in character, was rather frustrated by this exposure:

They wanted to search you all the time, always checking your ID, they were looking for some mistake, such as whether you were employed.⁴ These checks were incidental, usually I didn't have my ID, so they gave me a fine. The cops most often went to pubs, it was a matter of chance whether you were sitting there or not. (mánička Zbyšek, 56)

For Zbyšek, being interrogated by the police when simply passing through the public space or sitting in a pub was a frustrating aspect of his life in socialist Prague. As a result, he had a tendency towards restlessness and fearfulness. Zbyšek, as well as Radek, who was also rather careful, described their strategies of using public space in the following ways:

⁴ Employment used to be certified by a stamp in the identity card of an employee.

I often changed my path, I tried to avoid conflicts, I was constantly thinking about where the cops were – their cars, their stuff, their offices... I always felt like something was going to go wrong. The punkers were less inhibited, they were able to punch a cop. (mánička Zbyšek, 56)

One couldn't be too obvious about avoiding them, it was better to pretend you didn't care. The truth is that seeing a cop gave me chills. It was also different to walk alone or go with a group of people. If we were too many people with long hair, it was better to meet in Kampa where we were less visible. (mánička Radek, 41)

Avoiding troubles, introvert Zbyšek and intellectual Radek, both *máničky*, employed following strategies: hiding in secluded parks, woodlands, or backyards, being alert in the streets, changing path or behavior when spotting the police. Contrariwise, other people were less afraid and used the city differently. Punker Luboš, a teenager at that time, even preferred deliberate provocations of the authorities:

We were provoking even the cops, of course. We would enquire about stupid things, than they usually arrested us. Sometimes I was at the police station even three times a day. Once the cops pulled me out of a tramway and drove me to the feared office in Na Míčánkách, it was a terror there, I spent the night there, they were banging my head against the sink and in the end banned me from entering the districts of Prague 2 and 10, telling me that if they ever catch me there again, they'd kill me. There was no reason not to believe them, although we didn't take them very seriously. My attitude changed after the death of Pavel Wonka [dissident], I understood that they could have easily killed us. It led to an even bigger vehemence and determination, better organizing and purposefulness. Out of hooligans we became opponents of the regime. (punker Luboš, 45)

Punker Luboš, a boisterous young man, indulged in demonstrating his alternative identity in the public, both as a form of entertainment and a way of expressing his resistance and stubborn claim to freedom. As obvious, strategies employed by the alternative youth were strongly connected to the individuals' overall temperament and character.

Pursuers of alternative culture in socialist Prague had a special sensitivity towards places characterised by elevated ideological control; some places were stigmatised due to particular personalities with (potential) inclination or servility towards the regime. In some areas the authorities were especially uncompromising or cruel; Zbyšek was for example afraid of the police in the Školská Street. Also certain pubs had innkeepers or guests who operated as spies and informers of the State Security etc. When talking about time spent in pubs, Honza recalls how important it was to know where to go and who to trust, as the authorities' techniques of collecting records about potential subversive activities and sedition in various parts of the city were many. The account of Luboš shows that the same held even for schools and one's classmates. Collaborators of the regime existed even in one's closest environment:

I avoided illegal money dealers and various dumb heads with golden chains and pointed shoes. We anticipated that they were collaborating with the cops. Sometimes the State Security commissioned someone to grow long hair and sent them among underground people. But even though the dicks had long hair, they were easy to recognize – you just had to start talking about music or culture. Then the State Security changed their tactics – they picked one mánička, pushed them to the rack and forced them to collaborate. Some of them even took money for it. They did the same to the punkers. (mánička Honza, 50)

I got searched by cops and they found a paper with an address of an illegal concert. I was making shit up, but they called that place and found out that the concert had been there and got dissolved. Than a terror started, they searched my dormitory, confiscated my stuff, T-shirts, tapes, everything. Later I found out that I had been informed against by my classmate, his mother was a functionary in the Union of Socialistic Youth, I was on the list of the Secret Security and I got expelled from school. (punker Luboš, 45)

Spying practices of the State Security affected various spheres of people's lives. Honza, who spent a significant amount of time in pubs, was alert even when talking to his peers, making sure that none of them was a secret spy. As a result, he developed a technique of uncovering the spies' identity by forcing them to talk about insiders' topics. Due to being spied on, Luboš was expelled from school. Involvement in unofficial alternative culture could clearly lead to restrictions in the access to public resources, such as education, decent jobs, or conventional housing. This type of inequality resulted in a peculiar way of urban life of many members of alternative culture, which shall be further detailed in the following chapter.

Being an outcast, but free

For people alienated from the socialist regime it was often much easier to escape into their own world, which they had created for themselves. In exchange for freedom they decided to live like poor outcasts. Miloslav nostalgically recalled such freedom:

In second culture we were absolutely free. We had nothing to lose we didn't give a damn about anything any more. We were being pressured all the time, everyone had to be employed, you weren't supposed to detach yourself. It's hard to say that being interrogated by the State Security was some terrible form of pressure, it depends how you took it, after a while I didn't care about this game. (mánička Miloslav, 57)

Miloslav implied that due to the hardship faced within the official structures, most pursuers of alternative culture had given up living a "normal" life and instead opted for life as outcasts, the *lumpenproletariat*. Unlike in capitalism, in which one can combine subcultural identity with affluence and a relatively "normal life" (see Davis 2006), in socialism people with alternative identities were completely ostracized. Nonetheless, Luboš recalled the times of his homelessness with nostalgia:

It was an absolute freedom. We had a few places across the city where we could sleep, some of them were even furnished with carpets, and we were living in the whole city and really enjoying it. In the evening, depending on where you were, you just crawled into a heat exchanger. It was beautifully warm even when it was freezing outside, we had an old washing bowl, we put snow into it, put it on the pipes and in the morning we had warm washing water. At six, our alarm clock went off and five punkers climbed out of a sewer and caught a bus to work. (punker Luboš, 45)

Dominik's memories of living as an outcast are on the other hand spoiled by the fact that he was a drug addict at that time and always in search of a refuge:

On the hill in Trója my friend had a garden shed, we were surviving there for about half a year, nobody was bothering us, nobody was trying to take drugs from us. (mánička Dominik, 50)

Both Luboš and Dominik, young men expelled from schools and escaping from their parents, experienced freedom in the form of staying in their friends' homes or cottages, in the streets, sewers, heat exchangers, and abandoned apartments or buildings. For Luboš these were times of great juvenile adventure, for Dominik a struggle to survive. Surprisingly, outcasts often kept their daily jobs; unemployment was considered a more severe offence than the officially "non-existent" homelessness. Many punkers and *máničky* worked as non-qualified labourers; street cleaners, shop window washers, or boiler men. These were often the only jobs they could get, but these jobs also provided relative freedom and less responsibility and discipline, and a possibility to visit a pub during working hours. The place of employment, such as boiler rooms, might have served as a shelter or an alternative meeting point. Drugs abusers also routinely met in dealers' homes, where drugs were made, or at particular metro stops, and used drugs in parks, abandoned buildings, construction sites, etc. Some of them got treatment in asylums – a popular practice for those who wanted to avoid compulsory military service and employment. In general, members of alternative culture living as outcasts were exceptionally familiar with the city of Prague. But the more their lives deviated from the norm, the more conflicts they had with the police.

Inspired by the West, living in the East

Fighting the regime by alternative styles

For the youth in socialism, the styles of Western countercultures were mainly something that allowed them to escape the boredom and uniformity of the mainstream lifestyle and official culture of the socialistic society. When comparing punkers and long-haired people in socialist Prague to those in the West, David suggested that in Czechoslovakia an alternative image had initially been just a harmless apolitical fashion:

That real British punk attitude resulting from the social status was almost nonexistent here. The causes were different. There was no social poverty or unemployment here. The poverty was cultural and spiritual, and the people here purposefully provoked the rigid socialistic uniform society with their clothes and behavior. (punker David, 53)

Even though expressing one's alienation from the socialistic society and culture through an alternative style can be considered highly political, David did not see Czechoslovak punk as a form of protest against the regime. Instead, he saw it as a way of escaping the uniformity of the era. Luboš openly explained his need and admiration for alternative styles by the desire to play a fun game with the conservative public amidst a gray city:

I felt different practically everywhere, but mainly at school, I was bothered by a certain form of uniformity. We used to provoke everywhere, in a tramway, in shops, in discos, sometimes it ended up in a fight. Someone for example went to a hairdresser, took a chair with a sticky mohawk and asked to get groomed. My favorite operation was 'Autumn', three or four punkers were hanging upside down from the handrails and at the order 'Autumn' we all fell down on the ground, and made a terrible dust cloud. (punker Luboš, 45)

The account of Luboš shows that punk was probably just a readily available tool for disrupting the conservative society, not a profoundly thought-out identity. The regime's dogma of collective identity undermined and at the same time reinforced such kind of alternative aspirations. Citizens who were loyal and conformist were favoured, and in contrast, marginal and nonconformist groups were undesirable phenomena. Alternative appearance was regarded as an offensive symptom of ideodiversion that did not belong in the socialist city. But through repressions, punkers and *máničky* gained certain countercultural features; they had an antagonistic relation to the regime and the dominant societal values, but with the exception of the dissenting part of the Czech *underground*, hardly ever pursued any sophisticated political activity. This attitude seems to be rooted in the nature of Czechoslovak society from this period, which generally felt politically powerless and poorly engaged in political activities (see Lyons 2009). *Mánička* Petr, whose contemporary activity focuses on challenging racism and capitalism, supported this claim when talking about the role of socialist subcultures in activism and politics in the 1980s:

At most, people roared something out in a pub, but I don't know about anybody spraying something on a wall. It was quite risky, there was an awareness that it would turn into a real big bummer and would get investigated. There also weren't any demonstrations... Nobody dared to organize them until 1987, when the regime started to break apart. The first authorised demonstration in Prague was on The Day of Human Rights. I experienced my first demonstration in October 1988. We were just looking around with my friend and didn't dare to join the crowd. In the atmosphere of that time most people believed in the omnipotence of the police. (mánička Petr, 45)

In the 1980s, Petr was too young to be able to become more politically active or to understand what exactly was going on at that time. He recalled the atmosphere of complete helplessness and sheepishness among the public. When addressing the political activities of the youth in such atmosphere, Radek pointed out that even the protagonists of alternative cultures had been afraid to show their anti-regime sentiments:

People were trying to write something on the Lennon Wall,⁵ or put a candle there, but that required certain determination, there was a police window nearby, you never knew if someone wasn't going to pounce upon you, and they also had a security camera there. (mánička Radek, 41)

Lennon Wall used to be the only truly subcultural site in socialist Prague. According to Radek, who used to hang out in its proximity, expressing one's sentiments for this site could potentially result in troubles. In such context, open political protest was hardly imaginable.

Another reason for smaller political activity was little awareness about topics challenged by the Western countercultures of that era, such as the Cold War, environmental issues, consumerism, or social inequalities. Also, punkers or *máničky* in Prague dealt with neither socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, or a class divided society, nor the opposite, profit-oriented society living in consumer abundance. Instead they dealt with problems specific to the context of living under totalitarian rule, such as the regime's perverseness and oppressive practices, the country's isolation, cultural and spiritual poverty, various improvisatory techniques etc. However, nobody dared to openly express their protest in public; anti-regime sentiments and the critique of the socialistic society were typically expressed only within their own circles, often in a pub. Sophisticated debates and activities were secretly held in several apartments of Prague based dissidents, where people had access to literature, art and other cultural products and activities banned by the regime.

Alternative appearance and lifestyle were often the only explicit way of publicly expressing one's aversion to the regime. Contrariwise, non-conformity of the countercultures in the West typically involved certain degree of political engagement and protests against problems in the respective societies, but also quickly became accepted as an easily marketable part of the consumer society.

The position of alternative culture in socialist Prague

Unlike Western cities, alternative culture in socialist Prague was not restricted to any particular area. While the British punkers in the 1970s were mostly unemployed youth living in disinvested working-class neighbourhoods during an economic recession, and American hippies in the 1960s were young people fed up with the boredom and materialism of a middle-class lifestyle in the American suburbs, in

⁵ A wall in Lesser Town in Prague. It features a graffiti of John Lennon's face.

Prague pursuers of alternative culture came from all parts of the city because of the low socio-economic differences among different neighbourhoods. Furthermore, due to the non-existence of economic pressures, alternative culture in Prague was not restricted to undesirable and disinvested urban areas, such as former industrial zones and working-class neighbourhoods, which is often the case of the alternative cultures in Western cities due to the non-profit character of their activities (Pickerill – Chatterton 2006; Shaw 2006). In fact, in the 1980s, when Western countercultures started to squat buildings and inhabit various slowly de-industrializing urban sites and decaying working-class neighbourhoods (Chatterton – Hodkinson 2006: 205), Prague still operated on an industrial basis and due to class-less, socio-economically homogenous environment, factory workers were not confined to any particular lower status area. Squatting in its current form did not exist. Various forms of unauthorised occupation of abandoned premises were not the centre of police attention as most property was not private.

Instead of being marginalized by economic factors, or abused for gentrification purposes, alternative cultures in socialist Prague were forced to exist in secrecy. Centres of their activities were confined to temporary existence in various locations that seemed to be free from the regime's control. Paradoxically, they tended to concentrate the most in the centre of Prague, which was the most cosmopolitan space in Czechoslovakia, provided certain anonymity, and had the highest concentration of pubs with a relatively tolerant staff.

Conclusion

Unlike the Western countercultures that served as their inspiration, fans of alternative culture in socialist Prague were not subject to economic hardship throughout the era of normalization. In line with the political powerlessness of Czechoslovak society under socialism described by Lyons (2009), even members of alternative culture had few opportunities to be politically engaged. Their main focus was therefore on music, fashion and other products of alternative cultures from the West. As Vaněk concludes (2010: 568), alternative culture could not destroy the totalitarian regime, but it helped its fans make the regime more bearable. What remains interesting is the fact that a simple admiration for culture that was not easy to access, gave the alternative groups in socialist Prague certain countercultural features, consolidated their antagonistic relation towards the totalitarian regime, and compelled them to create their own unofficial world.

What was the contextual role of socialist Prague in forming this unofficial world, and the antagonistic, in some ways almost countercultural relation of Czechoslovak alternative cultures towards the totalitarian regime? To a large extent, this was due to the city's frustrating environment, characterised by cultural and spiritual poverty,

restricted diversity, and by lack of freedom, abundance of control, repressions and rigid rules. For punkers and long-haired people it was neither possible to buy any products of alternative culture, nor to simply walk in the streets without being suspected and often targeted by the police. Although he speaks about a city dominated by capitalist relations, Marcuse (2009: 191) says that people who are alienated from the city's dominant cultural society are also deprived from their access to the city and its resources, and frustrated by their inability to satisfy their needs and aspirations. It is possible to conclude that in a socialist city under totalitarian control, such deprivation is even more significant, as even unofficial independent attempts to meet one's needs might be punished by the authorities of the merciless regime. As a result, despite the alleged absence of social classes in a socialist city, the role of the pursuers of alternative styles was that of the second-class citizens.

Chatterton and Hodkinson (2006: 201) say that in the colonising, dehumanising and exploitative capitalist society, alternative cultures establish "autonomous spaces" which allow them to be creative, experiment, and live and relate to each other as equals. Punkers and long-haired people in a socialist city had the same need due to the oppressiveness of the totalitarian regime. Their secret world of unofficial practices, activities and events, was even more ephemeral, in constant movement, hiding from omnipresent ideological control. Due to strategic reasons, this fluid world that Vaněk (2002b) calls "the islands of freedom" combined both urban and rural sites and constituted the most authentic feature of alternative culture in socialist Prague. It comprised various improvising and DIY practices, and established very close relationships, cooperation, and mutual help among pursuers of alternative culture. This secret world also long avoided being co-opted by the market and exploited by mainstream culture, as was the case in many Western cities. Even if it could not destroy the regime or display the characteristics of a real counterculture, in some capacity the alternative culture represented one of the earliest forms of civil society in cities of totalitarian Czechoslovakia and significantly contributed to the dissemination of anti-totalitarian awareness among the young population of that time.

June 2013

References:

- Alan, Josef (ed.): 2001 – *Alternativní kultura: Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989*. Praha: Lidové noviny.
- Binkley, Sam: 2007 – Counterculture. In: Ritzer, G. (ed.): *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* 2. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Blažek, Petr – Laube, Roman – Pospíšil, Filip: 2003 – *Lennonova zed' v Praze: Neformální shromáždění mládeže na Kampě 1980–1989*. Praha: ÚSD AV ČR.
- Chatterton, Paul – Hodkinson, Stuart: 2006 – Why we need Autonomous Spaces in the fight against Capitalism. In: Bryan, K. – Chatterton, P. – Cutler, A.: *Do It Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World*. London: Pluto Press: 201–215.
- Chatterton, Paul – Hollands, Robert: 2003 – *Urban nightscapes: youth cultures, pleasure spaces and corporate power*. London: Routledge.
- Davis, Joanna: 2006 – Growing Up Punk: Negotiating Aging Identity in a Local Music Scene. *Symbolic Interaction* 29: 1: 63–69.
- Florida, Richard: 2002 – *The Rise of the Creative Class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York: Perseus Book Group.
- Fuchs, Filip: 2002 – *Kytary a řev aneb co bylo za zdi: Punk rock a hardcore v Československu před rokem 1989*. Praha: self-published.
- Haubert, Jan: 2010 – *Hluboká orba*. Praha: Julius Zirkus.
- Heath, Joseph – Potter, Andrew: 2004 – *Rebel Sell*. Toronto: Harper Collins Canada.
- Kolářová, Marta (ed.): 2011 – *Revolta stylem: Hudební subkultury mládeže ČR*. Praha: Slon.
- Ley, David: 1996 – *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lyons, Pat: 2009 – *Mass and Elite Attitudes during the Prague Spring Era: Importance and Legacy*. Prague: Institute of Sociology Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.
- Marcuse, Peter: 2009 – From critical urban theory to the right to the city. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 13: 2: 185–197.
- Mareš, Miroslav: 2003 – *Pravicový extremismus a radikalismus v ČR*. Brno: Barrister & Principal.
- Pickerill, Jenny – Chatterton, Paul: 2006 – Notes towards autonomous geographies. Creation, resistance, and self management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 6: 1–17.
- Pixová, Michaela: 2007 – Geography of subcultures: punks and non-racist skinheads in Prague. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Geographica* 42: 1–2: 109–125.
- Pixová, Michaela: 2011 – Český punk za oponou i před oponou. In: Kolářová, M. (ed.): *Revolta stylem: Hudební subkultury mládeže ČR*. Praha: Slon.
- Pruijt, Hans: 2004 – Squatters in the Creative City: Rejoinder to Justus Uitermark. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28: 3: 699–705.
- Pospíšil, Filip – Blažek, Petr: 2010 – „Vraťte nám vlasy!“ *První máničky, vlasatci a hippies v komunistickém Československu*. Praha: Academia.
- Shaw, Kate: 2006 – The Place of Alternative Culture and the Politics of its Protection in Berlin, Amsterdam and Melbourne. *Planning Theory and Practice* 6: 2: 151–170.
- Smolík, Josef: 2010 – *Subkultury mládeže*. Praha: Grada Publishing.
- Stárek, František Č. – Kostúr, Jiří: 2010 – *Baráky: Souostroví svobody*. Praha: Pulchra.
- Sýkora, Luděk: 2009 – Post-Socialist Cities. In: Kitchin, R. – Thrift, N. (eds.): *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* 8. Oxford: Elsevier: 387–395.
- Uitermark, Justus: 2004 – The Co-optation of Squatters in Amsterdam and the Emergence of a Movement Meritocracy: A Critical Reply to Pruijt. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28: 3: 687–698.
- Vaněk, Miroslav (ed.): 2002a – *Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu*. Praha: Votobia.
- Vaněk, Miroslav: 2002b – Kytky v popelnici. In: Vaněk, M. (ed.): *Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu*. Praha: Votobia: 175–235.

- Vaněk, Miroslav: 2010 – *Byl to jenom Rock'n'roll? Hudební alternativa v komunistickém Československu 1956–1989*. Praha: Academia.
- Zukin, Sharon: 2010 – *Naked city: The death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Žáček, Pavel: 2002 – Politická policie proti mládeži. In: Vaněk, M. (ed.): *Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu*. Praha: Votobia: 273–332.
-

Contact: RNDr. Michaela Pixová, Ph.D., Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Přírodovědecká fakulta, katedra sociální geografie a regionálního rozvoje, Albertov 6, 128 43 Praha 2, e-mail: mpixova@hotmail.com.

Alternativní kultura v socialistickém městě: Punkeři a máničky v Praze v 80. letech 20. století

Resumé: Města v socialistickém Československu se měla utvářet jako prostředí pro rozvoj ideální socialistické společnosti. Dogmatické sledování tohoto cíle vládnoucí komunistickou stranou však vyústilo v naprostou netoleranci vůči jakémukoliv projevu volnomyšlenkářství či domnělé opozici vůči socialismu. Od počátku 60. let 20. století se část československé mládeže inspirovala hnutími západních kontraktur, jako hippie či generace beatníků, od 70. let pak inspiraci nacházela rovněž v punkové subkultuře. Tito mladí lidé otevřeně dávali najevo své odcizení od oficiální kultury narušováním zavedených společenských standardů pro vzhled, chování a způsob trávení volného času. Státní bezpečnost je tak vnímala jako ideologicky pokřivené a ve své snaze o vymýcení jejich přítomnosti z veřejného prostoru a omezení jejich kontaktu s ostatními občany tyto lidi označovala jako tzv. závadovou mládež.

V Praze jakožto hlavním a zároveň největším městě Československa byla koncentrace mladých lidí inspirovaných západními kontrakturami největší. Jejich přítomnost, aktivity a kulturní produkce byly provokací pro společnost konformistů, a režim proto vůči nim vystupoval velmi nepřátelsky a represivně. Na rozdíl od západních kontraktur založených na politickém protestu vůči režimům, v jejichž kontextu se nacházely, byly jimi inspirované alternativní skupiny v Československu ve většině případů spíše apolitické. Jejich opozice vůči režimu se zrodila po roce 1968 především v důsledku snah totalitního státu jejich alternativní kulturní aspirace „normalizovat“. Tento článek prozkoumává způsoby, jimiž kontext socialistické Prahy v průběhu 80. let 20. století ovlivnil fanoušky alternativní kultury z hlediska jejich praxe a rutiny, jež vyústily v antagonistický vztah těchto lidí k totalitnímu režimu.