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Ladislav Holý and Ernest Gellner

Representatives of Two Incompatible Approaches to the Study of
Central European Society?

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Abstract: This study aims at comparing the method of work employed in the Central European region by two outstanding British social anthropologists of Czech origin. Ernest Gellner and Ladislav Holý, the two personalities who are the focus of this study, were in terms of their opinions very different from one another. Central Europe had a distinct significance for each of them, and they addressed it with different questions. The purpose of this text is not merely to outline what it was that divided them, but also to seek points in which their thoughts converged; to determine whether the common field left any traces in the subject of their interest, and whether the results of their research corresponded in any way at all. Given that both Ladislav Holý and his ideas received much less attention after his death than the views of Ernest Gellner did, the article devotes more space to the theoretical viewpoints of the former. The ideas Holý presented in the Czech academic press during the early 1990s, which are poorly accessible to the international academic community, are especially highlighted.

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Apart from Ernest Gellner, Ladislav Holý is probably the most outstanding scholar with links to Czech society to have influenced developments in British social anthropology in recent years. As far as theory and methodology in social anthropology is concerned, however, Holý and Gellner were at opposite ends of the spectrum of opinion. Holý also made very different use of his experience of Czech society and the research material that he gathered here in the early 1990s, the last years of his life.

Ernest Gellner saw events in Central Europe as warp and weft for overviews of macrosocial processes in broad historical perspective. Ladislav Holý took a different approach, carrying out an in-depth probe into the basic cultural assumptions behind Czech thinking, and analysing Czech behaviour and the Czech symbolic world at the end of the 1980s and in the period of post-communist transformation.

While Gellner approached events in Central Europe as part of all-European and world history, Holý's study of a precisely limited social collective actually cast doubt on the idea that post-communist transformation in the different countries of Central and East Europe followed an essentially similar course. Holý argued that on the contrary, post-communist transformation was in many respects a different process in each country, with the difference arising from the specific historical experience of each country and the specific features of the culture of their populations. Here Holý, like Geertz, Schneider or Spiro, used the word 'culture' to mean "collectively held notions, beliefs, premises, ideas, dispositions, and understandings" [Holý 1996: 2].

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While Ernest Gellner undertook a broad European-wide comparative study, Ladislav Holý concentrated on one 'in-depth' case study. While Gellner chose the grand historical retrospective, Holý kept to empirical data obtained in field research and went back to the past only occasionally, and only as the necessary explanatory context of certain present-day events. Gellner took a theoretical approach to his material that was close to what he himself called 'rational fundamentalism' whereas Holý drew on the theoretical background of interpretative anthropology for his researches, and called his anthropological writing, 'the interpretation of interpretation'. While Gellner explored the social climate in Central Europe primarily by looking at the intellectual legacy of its social elites, Holý tried to reveal the underlying cultural assumptions behind the everyday thinking and behaviour of ordinary citizens, politicians and journalists.

Gellner continually returned to Central European themes throughout his life. For him these themes were associated above all with the spiritual and intellectual legacy of the generation that had preceded him, and had drawn on the specific climate of the Austrian monarchy at the turn of the 19th/20th century. A full-blown Central European theme is to be found in his book *Words and Things* of 1959 [Gellner 1959], and among his later more minor works we should mention the studies *The Uniqueness of Truth, Past and Present*, and *Anthropology and Europe*,¹ which has also been published in Czech [Gellner 1994]. Holý, by contrast, only turned to a Central European theme in his last years, devoting several small-scale articles to the area: *Culture, Market Ideology and Economic Reform in Czechoslovakia* [Holy 1992], *The End of Socialism in Czechoslovakia* [Holy 1993], *Metaphors of the Natural and the Artificial in Czech Political Discourse* [Holy 1994] and *The Metaphor of 'Home' in Czech Nationalist Discourse* [Holy 1998]. Ladislav Holý also published a study in Czech, i.e. *Svoboda, národ a jednotlivec v české kultuře* [Freedom, Nation and Individual in Czech Culture] [Holý 1991a].

Ernest Gellner and Ladislav Holý were then to crown their Central European studies with book-length studies. In Gellner's case this was the book *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*, devoted to conflicts and syntheses in the thought of key figures of the 20th-century academic and philosophical scene who drew on the intellectual legacy of the Habsburg Empire shortly before its collapse [Gellner 1998]. In Holý's case it was the synthesis of his fieldwork, published in book form as *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation. National Identity and the Post-communist Transformation* [Holy 1996].

Ernest Gellner's ideas and methods have already been the subject of much scholarly attention in recent years. A series of commentaries on posthumously published texts in the collection *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, which John A. Hall and Ian Jarvie originally compiled for his seventieth birthday [Hall and Jarvie 1996], is particularly stimulating. I shall therefore limit myself in Gellner's case to very brief characterisation and pay more attention to the methodological approaches of Ladislav Holý, as he tried to introduce them to Czech readers in small articles and interviews in ethnological journals and other periodicals. These texts are today almost forgotten and so I shall try to summarise them and on this basis to open the way to proper understanding of the fieldwork research encapsulated in *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation*. In the last

¹) Both these texts came out after publication in academic journals in 1995 in Gellner's book *Anthropology and Politics* [Gellner 1995].

section I shall try to answer the question of whether Gellner's and Holý's work might not (contrary to appearances) in some ways mutually intersect and complement each other.

Thematically, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation* is isolated in terms of Holý's overall career and output, which was primarily concerned with African studies. Holý had been interested in African themes even before he emigrated from Czechoslovakia. He conducted his first research projects with the African Toka and Berti tribes as an employee of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. He also worked closely with the Náprstek Museum in Prague, and taught kinship systems at the Charles University Faculty of Arts. Even at this early stage he was already strongly influenced by the British social anthropological tradition. It is therefore no wonder that his work in the 1960s was very often concerned with questions of social structure, kinship systems, social stratification and later value systems. His ideas on where to draw the line between ethnography and other social sciences, which he presented together with Milan Stuchlík in the article *Co je a co není etnografie* [What is and What is not Ethnography] [Holý and Stuchlík 1964], were also focused on developments taking place in the social structure of pre-industrial and industrial society. While this text is now very dated, its argument was noteworthy and it was definitely one of the most interesting contributions to Czech ethnography of the 1960s. Ernest Gellner regarded it as a clear sign that even at this point Ladislav Holý's approach was close to that of British anthropologists.

In 1968 Ladislav Holý left Czechoslovakia. In 1968-1972 he directed the Livingstone Museum in Zambia, and from 1973 lectured in social anthropology in Great Britain, first in Belfast and later at St. Andrews. In Africa and Western Europe he moved directly into the centre of discussion on the colonial inheritance, colonial research projects and colonial situations, on hard and soft data, quantitative and qualitative data, and on interpretative anthropology. Ernest Gellner also made major contributions to this latter discussion, but unlike Gellner, Holý found the new movements a source of major inspiration. While in his youth he was strongly influenced by British approaches, after his departure from his homeland he also drew considerable inspiration from American cultural anthropology. Holý saw the role assigned to culture in anthropological study and the relation of culture to social structure – one of the central subjects of British social anthropology – as a characteristic aspect of the new paradigm emerging from the discussions just mentioned. When in 1991 he tried to describe the new situation to Czech readers, he wrote that:

“In 1881 E. B. Tylor defined anthropology as the *scientific study of culture*. While in the United States *culture* remained the subject of *cultural anthropology* almost without interruption, in Great Britain from the 1920s, what became established was *social anthropology*, which one of its modern pioneers A. R. Radcliffe-Brown defined as the comparative sociology of primitive societies. Social anthropologists focused on social structure and the main problem of research was to discover how different social structures were organised and how they functioned, how the social system was maintained in dynamic equilibrium as a result of political, economic, kinship and other bonds existing between the main segments of society, and by which specific mechanisms group interests were controlled and prevented from upsetting the stability of the whole social system... While American cultural anthropologists regarded the social system as a part of the whole culture, British social anthropologists considered culture as a derivation of the social system.” [Holý 1991b: 5]²

²) Holý's own italics.

In one article Holý illustrated this view of the history of anthropology using the example of the understanding of myth. He argues that whereas Bronislaw Malinowski “saw myth as a *social charter* that rationalised and legitimised existing social relations”, this conception of myth was overturned in the course of the 1950s under the influence of French structuralism, and in the work of Lévi-Strauss, myth becomes more an ideological instrument “that makes it possible for man to cope cognitively with basic contradictions in his own life experiences” [Holý 1991: 6]. Progress did not, of course, end here, but continued in the direction of the interpretative method. In interview given to the journal *Slovenský národopis* [Slovak Ethnography] Ladislav Holý described his own route to interpretative anthropology:

“Milan Stuchlík and I were at that time working on the same problems. What interested us was the question of which groups, structures of relationships and culturally constructed wholes formed the basis of recruitment to different kinds of activities. I did research on this problem in the Sudan, and my first work on the Berti was concerned with how far kinship and local or neighbourly relations determined recruitment to political, economic and ritual activities. That was why the book was called *Neighbours and Kinsmen*. The Berti themselves did not make a semantic distinction between these two terms, but they very clearly distinguished between them on the level of social action, and I tried to explain why they could talk about one category using the concepts of the second category. Milan did something similar in Chile, with the Mapuche, where he also used this concept of recruitment. Later we both came to Great Britain – I myself one year earlier – and we were together in Belfast. We were both influenced by phenomenology and both interested in the same problems, specifically the problem of the extent to which the knowledge people have determines or affects what they do. Our fundamental premise was that what people do not know – what is not part of their knowledge – plays absolutely no role in their real behaviour. It was actually our attack on positivism. We had combative discussions with the functionalists and the structural Marxists, who explained everything in terms of the structure of relations of production. We argued that a person who has no inkling of relations of production and macro-economic forces cannot be determined by them. What determines his behaviour is only what he knows himself, and to explain his actions by the existence of some sort of ‘objective’ forces is complete nonsense – a typically positivist approach. This is because it explains his actions in terms of a reality that has some kind of meaning only for us, since forces of production and macro-economic processes are concepts by means of which we create and understand reality. We are therefore making a category error if we impute our own ideas to someone who has an entirely different idea of the world. He acts on the basis of what he knows about the world, and not at all on the basis of what we know of the world.” [Chorvátová 1991]

Holý’s concept of interpretative anthropology gradually acquired clear form in his books *The Structure of Folk Models* of 1981, *Actions, Norms and Representations: Foundations of Anthropological Inquiry* of 1983 (both with Milan Stuchlík) and *Comparative Anthropology* of 1987. These were all primarily concerned with method, and the seriousness with which Holý kept returning to the question of methodology sprang from his view that a researcher’s approach to his subject (man) expressed his assumptions about the place of man in the world [Holý and Stuchlík 1983: 1]

The Structure of Folk Models of 1981 is a collection of articles, with a long introductory chapter of the same name jointly written by Holý and Stuchlík. This chapter is on the one hand a polemic with positivist anthropology and on the other an attempt at incorporating part of its methodology within the framework of interpretative anthropology. In their theoretical work, the authors did not try to invent a new science, but painstakingly sought for continuity between earlier research results and the new approaches. Their aim

was not to reject the earlier results, but instead to provide them with a new basis and give them a new status. In the case of *The Structure of Folk Models*, they wanted to create a new status for phenomena by applying the conceptual distinction between structure and culture, model and social action. Here they tried to show "...that one of the essential characteristics of social reality is that it is constituted reality: a process and result of social life, consisting of intentional performances of members of society." [Holý and Stuchlík 1981: 1]. It is precisely this property of social reality that gives rise to a series of methodological problems for social scientists, since in their research they encounter various different kinds of reality. The concept of 'model' is here defined as just one part of differentiated reality. It is the part that relates to the analytical or explanatory constructs of the observer. The models that people create in order to understand the world that surrounds them are considered by Holý and Stuchlík to be the main subject of anthropological research. This subject clearly comes from "a different world" to that of the natural sciences and to investigate it necessarily requires different rules of procedure. From this perspective, to talk about anything that Radcliffe-Brown might call *the natural science of society* would be beside the point. The introductory chapter to *The Structure of Folk Models* can be seen as a justification of the interpretative approach and an attempt to establish its primacy in anthropological research.

Holý had to complete *Actions, Norms and Representations* by himself following Stuchlík's death. He focussed here on the question of the relationship between how social systems (structures) work and what people do and why they do it. As a field researcher Holý knew that field data about structure and about human activity rarely fitted together. The social bonds described in accounts of the social structure of a given society can form a certain norm, but this is breached by almost every concrete social act on the basis of the specific cultural assumptions of an individual or group. The three words of the book's title represent the basic levels on which Holý believed social reality could be explored. Right at the beginning in the introduction, Holý emphasises that a good anthropologist intuitively investigates all the levels and this is indeed the only correct approach. Very often, however, the anthropologist is not aware of their ontological status, mixes them up and so ends up with a series of imprecise or confused conclusions. According to Holý one frequent lapse is the expectation that people will act on the basis of social structural relations. When the anthropologist discovers that this is not the case, he searches in the society for malfunctions to explain it. In fact, he gets close to teaching his natives what they ought to be doing on the basis of his academic conclusions on structure. Holý therefore presents evidence that people's specific behaviour is not blindly determined by structural relations, but is primarily determined by cultural choice. To simplify matters, we might say that one of the intentions of the book is to rehabilitate culture in relation to structure.

Comparative Anthropology, which Holý edited and for which he wrote an article entitled *Description, Generalisation and Comparison: Two Paradigms* [Holý 1987: 1-21], had a different purpose. It discussed the status that the comparative method – a key instrument in positivist anthropology – ought to have in interpretative anthropology. Here Holý emphasises that positivist anthropology rests on the assumption that while cultures differ, they also have much in common, and also that social facts are things that exist independently of each other. Both these assumptions make possible a third, i.e. that individual cultures are comparable to each other. Comparability means that general features of different cultural phenomena can be found and generalisations can be made on the character of social facts. The correctness of such a generalisation can be again tested by

comparison. As Radcliffe-Brown said, “without systematic comparative studies anthropology will become only historiography and ethnography [cited in Holy 1987: 2]. According to Holý, questions of data-collection in positivist anthropology mainly related to efforts to ensure that the social facts gathered were comparable, valid, free of observer interference and so suitable for purposes of generalisation. From the point of view of methodology, the gathering of facts or descriptions did not appear problematic in itself; what were problematic were the generalisations obtained by comparison, because the better, the more detailed and the more extensive the data, the more debatable was its comparability [see also Uherek 2001].

For Czech readers Holý later offered the following brief summary of the basic ideas contained in these three books:

“In the traditional conception of anthropology, culture (a system of symbols and meanings) was regarded as a field including religion, ritual, magic, mythology and art. In traditional studies kinship, economics and politics were not considered to be systems of symbols and meanings, since it was believed that they were based in really existing genetic relations, objectively existing relations of production, distribution and consumption, or on objectively existing power relations. Current anthropology has rejected this view, since it assumes that every system (...) is a system of symbols and meanings, i.e. a cultural system.

Symbols and meanings are parts of human understanding, interpretation and expression. In other words, they are parts of the cognitive and communication processes through which people give meaning to their experience and the social reality in which they live, and through which they can share these experiences and this reality with others. If we talk about meanings, we are also talking about the means by which people understand the world in which they live and by which they make themselves understood. We are, however, at the same time talking about processes by which people not only understand the world, but actually create it: if this world exists only in the parameters of symbols and meanings that are cognitively apprehensible, and if these symbols and meanings are the result of human thought, then the world that people mutually share and about which they communicate exists only as their own creation or cultural construction.” [Holý 1991b: 6]

Ladislav Holý is not arguing that the world does not exist or is unknowable, but that its meaning for man is a social construction and it is meaning that makes the world what it is for man.

It will now already be clear what Ladislav Holý came back to Bohemia to study. He came to discover what kind of discourses were going on here roughly in the period 1987-1992, which symbols were being used in these discourses and, especially, what it all meant for the actors of the events themselves. We can interpret any kind of gesture in many different ways. Ladislav Holý could have interpreted the gestures and speeches of the actors of the November 1989 events in many different ways from the comfort of his study in St. Andrews, but it was not his aim to interpret gestures and speeches. He was interested in the meanings that the actors of the events were investing in those gestures and speeches, and in how they saw the world around them through these meanings. His aim was to interpret the interpretations of the actors of the events, and during the 1970s and 1980s he had in fact begun to believe that this was the greater part of the work of a social anthropologist. As he put it,

“The aim of anthropology (...) is not to study social and cultural phenomena (the human world) as objective facts that can be considered independent of the defining activities of people. These social and cultural phenomena are the result of human ideas and actions, and must therefore be studied from the point of view of the experiences of the people themselves and the meanings that they themselves attribute to their experience. Today if anthro-

pologists study sexual roles, for example. i.e. the differences between the participation of men and women in social, economic, political or religious institutions, they cannot start from the premise that *men* and *women* are simply given natural objects independent of any culture, and that we know what a *man* is and what a *woman* is. The primary anthropological task is to discover how gender and sexuality are conceptualised in a given culture and how the categories of *man* and *woman* are culturally constructed.” [Holý 1991b: 6; see also Holý 1987: 10].

For Holý these postulates signalled the end of ideas about the methodological unity of the natural and social sciences. From this point of view the social sciences have a different set of methods reflecting their subjective character. For Holý the new paradigm also meant a radical shift from anthropological generalisation to description. The internal understanding of a culture from *the point of view of the actor* and in the terms used in the culture assumed a key role. The question of how to collect data in a way that most facilitated comparison is losing its meaning, since generalisation has been abandoned as the aim of anthropological knowledge. In contrast, the crucial question is now how to collect data of a kind that will legitimately show how reality is constructed by the actors studied and what meanings social phenomena have as a result of their construction and interpretation. This question cannot, however, be answered purely by participation in the activities of the social actors. Simple observation is more suitable. The aim of anthropological work is not then generalisation, but adequate description of culturally specific cognitive worlds.

For Holý field work cannot mean the testing out of a theory but is actually the procedure needed to create the theory. The process of creation of the theory should also take place without previously adopted analytic categories, and on the basis of categories obtained from the conceptualisations of the social actors themselves. This implies that every social situation should have its own theoretical modification. Generalising theory is abandoned and in its place there emerges a ‘science’ of the culturally specific [see also Uherek 2001].

Holý’s views on the aim and methodological equipment of anthropology were reflected in the form of his research in Bohemia and the way in which this research was presented in his texts of the 1990s.

The centre of the research was not to reveal what Czechs are like, but to interpret what Czechs say about themselves on the question of what they are like and why they say it, why they use certain symbols in a certain situation, why they express their opinion that the past can be atoned for, why they regard the metaphor of the centre as positive and so forth. Czech conceptualisations of Czechs are also examined in the specific context of a specific situation. The time framework that interests Holý is the present, but even because in completely new situations old symbols are used filled with a new meanings, he sometimes goes back to earlier history. Sometimes he also does this for the sake of comparison. He is fascinated by the similarity of the rhetoric of revolutions at different times in Czech history, and how at different critical turning-points people speak in very similar ways about the moral decline of the previous period, and how positive traditions are unearthed. The similarities and differences in what Czechs say they are doing, led Holý to try to formulate at least a few basic cultural premises that are accessible in the form of concepts and that make up constructs through which Czechs attempt to interpret the world in which they move, and through which they mould it in accordance with these cultural premises.

In 1993 texts by Ladislav Holý and Ernest Gellner appeared side by side in Chris Hann's collection *Socialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Local Practice*. By coincidence both chose the same theme – the fall of communism, its context and causes – offering us a chance to examine whether their different methods and ways of perceiving facts led to comparable results. It should be said that they did not. Gellner talks in broad historical perspective about the fall of a system that combined elements of capitalist industrialism and pre-capitalist centralism, which in the pre-capitalist era had been associated primarily with the question of land ownership [Gellner 1993]. He talks about the problem of power, compulsion and control of resources. He shows the shortcomings of communism as a system and demonstrates that these systemic shortcomings doomed it to extinction. In contrast Ladislav Holý takes a specific example from the Czech *milieu* and explores what students and intellectuals symbolised for Czechs and the meanings that Czech citizens invested in the event when on the 17th of November 1989 the police attacked students in Prague during a permitted demonstration. In this text he also describes the role ascribed in Bohemia to actors and writers and why they were able to become an important motor of events of 1989. He looks at a further series of specific historical episodes in a similar spirit and tries to identify the meanings they had for the Czech population and why people reacted as they did. From these concrete episodes he then derives the causal chain of events leading to the fall of communism in one specific country. Since particular meanings are attributed to the event by particular actors, the interpretation is derived from the position of the actor. In Gellner's conception we are looking at the disintegration of systems or structures, while in Holý's conception we are looking at a chain of episodic events, in which people react to specific stimuli on the basis of the meanings that they attribute to them; interpretation from the position of the actor reveals the cultural premises of a given society.

Did Holý really, however, conduct the interpretation from the position of the actor? There is no simple answer to this question, but I can document the fact that Czech intellectuals at least, as one section of the actors from whose position the interpretation was supposed to be conducted, very often did not recognise their own positions in Holý's exposition. The discussions that Holý had with Czech ethnologists at meetings in 1991-1992, for example, ended without much mutual understanding having been achieved.

It would therefore seem that Gellner and Holý's conclusions and methodological approaches, if not in mutual contradiction, rather passed each other by, (just as Holý's conclusions and the thoughts of the actors of the events described rather passed each other by as well). Nonetheless, Holý's *The Little Czech* has one major aspect in which there is some meeting between his view of the reality studied and Gellner's.

Holý's book can be read as a book about Czech cultural premises, or as a book about the fall of communism and consequent social transformation, but it can also be read as a book about Czech nationalism.

While Ladislav Holý derived a whole range of meanings of individual terms from their everyday use in the Czech *milieu*, 'nationalism' was not one of them. I believe that one reason for this was the fact that in Bohemia this word has a strongly negative connotation and is rarely used in accounts of the behaviour of Czechs. In Czech usage nationalism means social deviation and is not employed in the same way as it is by Western researchers. On the other hand, human action and behaviour of the type covered by the term in Western academic literature is completely commonplace. Holý seems therefore to

have included nationalist thought and behaviour in Bohemia under concepts already defined by professional western scholars.

Like many other researchers, Holý too distinguishes between the “Western concept of the nation as an association of people living in a common territory under the same government and laws and the eastern concept of the nation as an organic, ethnically based community.” [Holy 1996: 47] Holý’s argument here, which refers to the works of H. Kohn, A. D. Smith and G. Csepeli, also has some correspondence with the distinction Ernest Gellner made between the universalistic-atomic and romantic-organic vision in his book *Language and Solitude* [Gellner 1998: 21-29]. It is precisely on the basis of a theory of nationalism corresponding to the Gellner approach that Holý persuasively argues that the two types of nationalism involve different interpretations of the basic function of the state, and different conceptions of the relationship between nation and state. Where Gellner used similar conceptual tools to show how the nationalist and universalist concepts influenced the thought of intellectual elites, Holý by detailed analysis shows how eastern, ethnic nationalism can define national groups irrespective of state frontiers and redefine new frontiers on purely ideological principles. Holý offers a subtly account of the mechanisms by which a nation can set itself in opposition against a state to which it has been subjected for years, excommunicate the state from the nation and by change in the state structure redefine the unity of the nation and state. In relation to the events preceding the fall of communism in 1989, he also persuasively shows that the rising tide of national feeling and the popularity of nationalist arguments was not the result of the fall of communism, but came before it. Holý presents a great deal of cogent evidence for the claim that at least in Czechoslovakia the overthrow of communism was carried out in the name of an oppressed nation decimated by its own state. Through simple description of the events he shows that central national symbols accompanied every demonstration from 1987 and that national argument was the link that bridged differences of opinion and social barriers. “The people who opposed the communist regime in demonstrations styled themselves not citizens, democrats, or workers but Czechs.” [Holy 1996: 48-49] On the basis of analysis of discourses of the time, Holý finds, by contrast, that discussion of civic society and a vision for the ordering of the new state began to appear in Czechoslovakia in greater measure only in the last phase of the fall of communism, at the turn of the years 1989/90. Here Holý is interested in how Czech nationalism is constructed. He derives a basic characterisation by analysing how Czechs defined themselves at the expense of Germans and Slovaks.

Like Gellner, Holý in his conclusions creates paired categories resembling the Gellnerian individualistic/atomistic and organic dichotomy [Gellner 1998: 3-6]. He talks about an nationalist-egalitarian discourse that is collectivist and in which individuals are emanations of the collectivity, and an individualist discourse, which treats individuals as autonomous and separate. According to Holý, while these two discourses are in dispute, in Bohemia they to a certain extent intersect and counterbalance each other, because they are emerging in the same social climate and operating in one society. Through Holý, then, the Habsburg dilemma described in Gellner’s book *Language and Solitude* revives in contemporary Central European everyday life, finds its parallels and influences the life of the individuals. In times of social crisis the nationalistic discourse prevails, and in times of social prosperity the individualistic discourse [Holy1996: 201].

The theme of nationalism is very fully developed in Ladislav Holý’s book. His account of the nation as a supra-personal entity, discussion of the relation of the nation to

tradition, and reflections on national leaders in the Czech environment have intellectual power. Gellner's abstract postulates on the workings of Central European nationalism have thus been elaborated on the basis of detailed field work – perhaps partly due to Holý's inconsistency in using ready-made concepts of nationalism rather than the social constructions created directly in the field by the actors studied.

In his commentary on Gellner's text *Words and Things*, Chris Hann wrote that "neither Malinowski nor Gellner have themselves consistently practised what they have preached." [Hann 1996: 46]. The same might certainly be said of Ladislav Holý. I believe he would have been pleased to hear it, since his last social theory (which Gellner would certainly have passionately attacked) is based on the idea that people do not do as they say and that their actions are not inevitably connected to bonds within the social structure.

Translated by Ana Bryson

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