

One Hundred Years of The Czech Question: A Historian's Account

Urban, Otto

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Urban, O. (1995). One Hundred Years of The Czech Question: A Historian's Account. *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, 3(1), 21-31. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53717>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

One Hundred Years of *The Czech Question*

A Historian's Account

OTTO URBAN*

Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University, Prague

Abstract: In view of the fact that Masaryk's *Czech Question* was often misinterpreted, both at the time it first appeared and later on, the paper begins with a description of the actual state of the society at the time Masaryk's work was written. Czech society is considered on three interrelated levels: that of internal life, the broader level of its position within the Hapsburg monarchy and finally the still broader context of Central Europe and Europe. Masaryk conceived his Czech question as a sociological problem, although in fact it was not a sociological but, in modern terminology, political analysis based on historical material. The historical material helped Masaryk find arguments to support his basic thesis. Masaryk thus created a certain scheme of periodisation which was later to become both the object of criticism from historians and self-corrections. Masaryk's arguments are based on the thesis that the Czech question is one of humanity or religion. Although this thesis was derived from historical reality, it was supposed to have a certain historical value itself. Masaryk the religious thinker and reformer thus linked Czech national feeling with metaphysically conceived values, bestowing a new quality upon the Czech national consciousness. In the eyes of contemporary historians, Masaryk's interpretation of the Czech history is outdated, although its inspiring character as a critical reflection remains. The real situation of contemporary Czech society being completely different today, the potential conception of the Czech question must also be rephrased.

Czech Sociological Review, 1995, Vol. 3 (No. 1: 21-31)

In his work, *Ěeská otázka* (The Czech Question), Masaryk expressly stressed that it was merely „bits“ from his thinker's workshop; decades later, as president of Czechoslovakia, he repeated this on various occasions. He himself thus warned against attaching too much value to any of the statements and conclusions contained within, and did not insist on their unquestionable applicability. At the same time, he never admitted to any doubts concerning the main point of the Czech question as an intellectual, moral or, as he himself wrote, religious question. The fact that he „wrapped“ the core of his conception in historical subjects and wrote dozens of pages „about something else“, could and did become the cause of many misunderstandings resulting in complicated disputes and pseudodisputes. Nevertheless, he did achieve one of his main aims: he provoked the Czech intellectual public to critical self-reflection on the foundations of the very existence of the Czech society.

Not everyone, however, understood this initiative in the way Masaryk had intended, especially after he had solved the Czech question in practice during World War I and had become the leading authority not only on the solution to the question, but also on its interpretation. Therefore, original critical self-examination of Czech society was often

*) Direct all correspondence to Prof. Otto Urban, Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University, department of history, Palachovo náměstí 1, 110 00 Praha 1.

mistaken for reflection on Masaryk's conception of the Czech question. Masaryk became the criterion or the hub of apologetic or polemic interpretations while Czech reality was often perceived and interpreted not directly as such, but through the comments and interpretations of Masaryk's followers and opponents. The Czech question was laden with an „historical burden“: it was not by chance that Masaryk also inspired disputes over the meaning of Czech history, nor that historians reacted to his suggestions in a very lively manner. The Czech question was thus considerably lessened, retaining the form of 19th century classical historicism, however little Masaryk had wished this. In most cases the Czech question became a question about the meaning of Czech history, with the only alternative to this being the more or less ingenious journalistic reflections on „what are we like“. No really modern analysis of the Czech question, combining historical, sociological, economic, legal, literary, art-historical, psychological etc. elements, has yet been written: hence Masaryk's suggestion remains an open challenge.

Before outlining the way in which Masaryk and some others reflected on the Czech question at the turn of the century, it is worth taking a look at a very rough outline of what Czech society of the day was like. This can be done on three related and interlocking levels: on the level of the „interior“ life, i.e. those autonomous processes which are in progress within the life of the national society, on the broader level of its „outer“ basis in the Hapsburg monarchy and finally on that of the still broader basis of the Central European or European context.

1. It is a fact that during the 1860s and 1870s, Czech political leaders did not achieve recognition of the Czech society as an independent state and political subject. All constitutional federalist projects, whether they were federalist in the sense of ethnic or historically-legal federalism, or autonomistic, remained in fact unfulfilled wishes. The Czech political public was frustrated by the fact that the great projects of the day remained unrealised, although this did not represent a block to all possibilities of further development. Civic rights, guaranteed by the December Constitution of 1867, safeguarding, among other things, free national development, offered a more limited nonetheless sufficient space for asserting demands for national emancipation. This was clearly manifest, especially after 1880, when Czech political leaders abandoned the fight „against the state“, in the sense of passive resistance towards the whole constitutional system, and started the fight „over the state“, i.e. the active politics of using the legal possibilities of asserting partial assets (or „crumb“ assets, as they were called in those days). The maximalistic project of constitutional law was formally maintained and remained the hub of Czech politics, although it was shifted to more mature and favourable times.

The partial gains were indeed, if judged by the maximalistic project, mere crumbs. However, in reality they meant much more and were, among other things, a source of important structural changes within Czech society as well as one of the essential factors in its „maturing“ into a modern national community. After the 1930s, Czech society became increasingly industrial while Czech capital started to dominate the economy of the Czech lands, as with the growth of Czech banking capital and the emergence of a majority of Czech entrepreneurs in the chambers of commerce and trade. Modern industry, with its partially hired labour force, joined the strong and relatively prosperous agricultural and craft sectors of the Czech economy. The anniversary exhibition of 1891 showed clearly how actively the Czech community had participated in the general economic development; the extensive building and investment activity, continuing until the beginning

of World War I, confirmed this fact. With all the natural and inevitable variations, all sectors of the modern economy underwent a very positive development, particularly from the 1890s onwards.

Czech culture also experienced a no lesser and indeed more marked development. This did not lie simply in the above-average results of artistic and scientific endeavour, but even more in the fact that from the 1880s, the institutional grounds of modern Czech education were in essence established and illiteracy practically eradicated among the Czech community. The average quality of general education increased, particularly following the development of the secondary school (Gymnasiums) and other specialised school systems; from 1882 there was also a Czech university in Prague. Publishing activities were expanding, new public cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries, libraries etc., were founded and various cultural activities were developing, whether professional or amateur (theatre, singing, music ensembles, activities in physical education and sports etc.). From this point of view, the balance of Czech cultural life at the turn of the century was far from unfavourable.

The consequences of the economic and cultural development were inevitably reflected in the social and political sphere and influenced further development after the 1889-1891 crisis. Czech society, divided both socially and in opinion, was no longer able to accept the conception of „unified national politics“ as the prominent (Old-)Czech National Party (with František L. Rieger and František Palacký at its head), had advocated from the beginning of constitutional political life in the 1860s. The conception of „national unity“, more or less authoritatively laid down, was dictated by the original weakness and relative limitations of Czech activities in the middle of the 19th century; by the end of the century, however, the society had developed past this point. There had been differences of opinion among Czechs from the beginning of the process of Czech national emancipation, but it was only from the 1890s that Czech society, less structured in terms of opinions, became distinctly diversified and pluralistic, with a variety of attitudes and differences in the social and political spheres. Disputes and discussions, including the debates on the Czech question, were an inseparable part of this process. Czech society towards the end of the 19th century was a politically vital national community.

2. The inner growth of the Czech society was nevertheless making its position within the Hapsburg monarchy increasingly more complicated. The key to this position were Czech-German relations within the Czech lands themselves. In the German environment before 1886, the Czech Lands had been considered part of „historical Germany“ and, at the same time, as an inseparable part of an integrated unit together with the Alpine countries. Czech political independence, in both the national and the legal sense, was a legacy of its historical past such that if a specific autonomous status were granted to the Czech lands, then it could only be within the broader state unit of Germany and Austria. The society on their territory was not an independent political subject, regardless of its national character.

Czech politics of national and political emancipation were based on entirely contradictory assumptions, and from the point of view of both historical and natural law, stressed the independence of Czech society and from the 1860s on, also that of the Czech lands. The dismissal of the Hapsburg monarchy from the newly constituted Germany in 1866 and the recognition of the historical state law of Hungary in the following year

played a decisive role. For a long time Austria-Hungarian dualism eliminated all broader federalist conceptions and Czech politics was „pushed back“ to Hungarian positions.

It was then that the continuing Czech-German dispute about the character of the Czech lands started again in an extremely urgent form. It was solved, basically to the benefit of Germans, by the constitution of 1867 and by holding back Czech attempts to revise it in 1870-71. German political leaders from Bohemia and Moravia strictly rejected any idea of a united political Czech nation (in terms of language, a Czech and German nation!) and the life of the German national community in the Czech lands was associated solely with the existence of a (smaller) non-Hungarian Austria. The Czech side initially rejected this „disfigured new formation“ absolutely and withdrew into offended ignorance. The immovability of both standpoints resulted in a stalemate and a solution to the political position of Bohemia or the Czech lands could only be achieved after the prior consensus of the Czech and German politicians in these countries. From this point of view, activities in Vienna, of both the sovereign and the central authorities, were limited considerably until the end of the monarchy. The position of the Czech lands within the Hapsburg monarchy, this being the only alternative that was considered by the leading Czech political parties and movements before 1914, was primarily a question of Czech-German relations within these countries.

Czech activity after 1880 was limited to the current constitutional system, but its tendency was towards the revision of the system in the sense of the original constitutional aims, as German representatives quickly realised. The growing strength of the Czech community inevitably meant a relative weakening of the German one and aroused „defensive“ tendencies, attempts at „seclusion“ and administrative „separation“ of the Czech and German parts of Bohemia. The Czech side reacted to the attempts to „chop up“ Bohemia with intensified national irritation and newly repeated appeals to „raise the fallen banner of constitutional law“. The Czech-German tension culminated for the first time in 1886-1890 and again, on a broader basis and with more serious consequences, in 1896-1899.

In relation to this, it is important to mention the two conceptionally different meanings of the Czech question. The Czech question meant one thing in the political, legal and indeed territorial sense, and had a different dimension in the political-cultural and language sense. The Czech question in the legal-political and territorial sense was above all one of the position of Bohemia, while Moravia and Silesia were only indirectly involved; the question of Czech-German relations (in Bohemia) was an essential part of it. The Czech question in the cultural and language sense exceeded the borders of historical-political details and involved above all the „inner“ possibilities of development of the national society, with all questions of relations only indirectly included. Until the 1890s, no major distinction was drawn between the two meanings since the Czech question as a cultural and language problem was not perceived as a „question“ in the Czech environment and all attention focused politically on the legal and territorial aspect. It was only Masaryk who turned the problems of the inner life of Czech society, which had not until then been sufficiently reflected upon, into a „question“.

Growing tension in Czech-German relations was progressively blocking the possibility of a satisfactory and generally acceptable solution concerning the position of the Czech community within the Hapsburg monarchy. This caused an apparently paradoxical situation: Czech society was more and more „growing into“ Austria and participated in

Austria's economic and cultural flourishing, much to its own benefit. Moreover, with the exception of the upper echelons of the army and diplomatic service, which remained the domain of German-Austrian, Hungarian and Polish elites, the Czech contribution to the state administration was constantly growing both in the Czech lands and in the central offices in Vienna. This „ingrowing“ did however have its limits, which were subjectively felt more distinctly than before due to the developing „expansion“ of the Czech society. Czech society at the turn of the century was capable of self-government, not just in theory but in practice. There were enough qualified and professionally well-prepared politicians and bureaucrats. The fact that even after great disputes and often long struggles, the Czech community gained only „crumbs“ resulted in frustrating feelings of envy and often caused a lukewarm or even alienated relation to Austria.

National and social questions were more and more often combined at the turn of the century, when the mass political parties and movements started and the working class, the urban middle class and the rural population all became active. The Czech-German dispute thus took on a new aspect: a number of social questions were interpreted as nationalistic questions while nationalism itself was „enriched“ by facts of modern race theories, which added to the original differentiating signs (historical and non-historical nations; civilised and uncivilised nations, culturally mature and immature nations etc.); biological signs (valuable or superior nations, flourishing or degenerate nations etc.).

3. The position of the Czech society within the Hapsburg monarchy depended in particular on the solution to Czech-German relations in the Czech lands; its position within the broader European context depended on the position of the monarchy in Europe, which from 1879 meant above all on German-Austrian-Hungarian relations.

The Czech political programme was in essence based on the conception of a powerful and independent Hapsburg confederation of states as a power bloc „between Germany and Russia“. When Palacký first formulated this programme in 1848, the Hapsburg monarchy existed as a hub for the crystallisation of a great mid-confederation of states, but modern Germany did not exist in the political and territorial sense and, from the point of view of the specific ethnic and political situation, there was in fact no modern Russia either. The Polish question, which involved Germany, the Hapsburg Empire and Russia, remained open, but there was also the Balkan question. Palacký's idea of the centralisation of three powers – Germany, Russia and the Hapsburg monarchy as an umbrella confederation for all small nations from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea – was „incomplete“ in political terms and only in the long-term a far-reaching „revolutionary“ programme. The preconditions for its possible realisation were internal changes within the Empire itself (the application of the principle of ethnic federalism under a constitutional monarchy) on the one hand and, on the other, the ability of the monarchy to become a real centre of crystallisation, around which other national societies could „cluster“.

Neither of these preconditions was met. The change from absolutism to constitutionalism was more complicated and difficult after 1849 and the result of the internal political transformation of the monarchy did not meet with the original idea of the programme. Moreover, after the defeats of 1859 and especially 1866 (but indirectly also after the German victories in 1870/71) the monarchy lost any possibility of participating effectively in decisions on European issues and of pursuing active power politics. Modern Prussia-Germany was dominant in Central Europe, and Russia did not intend to give up

her ambitions in the Balkans. The second-rate position of the Hapsburg monarchy as a tolerated traditional power was clearly confirmed at the Berlin Congress in 1878: any active politics „between Germany and Russia“, which would lead to the realisation of the original assumptions, was out of question. If there were comments about Austria-Hungarian dualism as a „monarchy at will“, the same could have been said to apply to the wider European context after 1878. Small European nations „between Germany and Russia“ did not become the subject of European politics, but the subject of German, Russian and indirectly also other countries' interests.

All the outward attributes of Hapsburg power were, however, maintained and, in terms of area and number of inhabitants, the empire on the Danube was a unit that was not easily ignored. It ensured a certain stability in the south-eastern part of Central Europe, neutralised national conflicts within this region and limited both German and Russian ambitions. Its „retarding“ or „restraining“ role consisted to some degree in this.

This role was exploited during World War I, but the Czech community (with the surrounding German areas!) became more sensitive and perceptive to certain tendencies which had been obvious long before 1914. It was impossible not to take into account the enormous economic and political expansion of Prussia-Germany, which from the 1890s onwards was more and more often linked with demands for „world assertion“ (Weltpolitik, Weltmachtstellung). Not only the Hapsburg monarchy, but also the „new“ Prussia-Germany was to play the leading role in the reconstruction and reorganisation of the political arrangement of Central Europe; the Mitteleuropa plans originating during World War I were merely the results of these tendencies. The young publicist Hubert G. Schauer recognised the new situation in the Czech environment very clearly as early as the end of the 1880s and, through his „two questions“, gave the Czech question the very form to which Masaryk reacted several years later: Given all the inherent difficulties and complications, were there real reasons to develop an independent Czech national feeling as a purposeful and equal part of European culture and civilisation along with the dynamically developing German national feeling, and if there were such reasons, what were they? The questions and doubts themselves could not, of course, be dismissed through a little suggestive Schauerian questioning.

At the same time, it is remarkable how the idea that the Czech existence was not to be taken for granted, thus formulated, appeared in a period both of obvious inner strengthening and of the formation of Czech society as an established national community. There were, however, no real reasons for anxiety; Europe was apparently proceeding towards a promising future in which all conflicts would be solved positively and rationally and all civilisation and cultural substances created by the „revolutionary“ 19th century, would be fully realised.

The fact that Czech society was gradually advancing under the conditions of the gradual decline of the Hapsburg monarchy gave the Czech question potentially broader European dimensions. This, however, only became fully clear in 1914 and the years following.

* * *

Hardly any period is fair to itself or capable of balanced critical self-reflection. Periods of questioning in particular are scarcely favourable as most of the questions asked anticipate a biased answer and require a „solution“ in terms of politics or ideology. This phenome-

non is quite natural as no historical period to date has had a real reason for self-satisfaction and there were, are and always will be sufficient reasons to ask questions.

The turn of the century was almost a classical period of question-posing and casting certainty into doubt. The laws and assumptions of the natural sciences were being revised or relativised, the social sciences were losing their positivistic optimism, the basis of the aesthetic perception of the world was overturned and modern psychiatry was cynically proving to people that they were not „masters in their own homes“. Everything became or was perceived as „not self-evident“ and questionable, beginning with great political and state issues, through the whole complex of social issues to seemingly marginal and normally stable relations between generations, sexes and the like. From the point of view of technological progress, however, the process of social modernisation was proceeding smoothly and undisturbed; the „uncertain“ world was changing day by day, new discoveries and inventions were being made with self-assurance and self-evidence. Unsure and doubting, people were daily overcoming their limitations.

Intellectual modernism, scientific, political and artistic, was not only searching for an explanation of the new period, but was also trying to give it a more precise form and style. People were aware of the extent to which the pre-modern political and social problems continued to survive under the surface of the dazzling machine society. The critical balance of the dying 19th century was usually not only an analysis of the past, but also contained far-reaching and sometimes quite bizarre projects and constructions of political, social, aesthetic or other nature. On the one hand, there was the scepticism and tiredness of the idleness, mediocrity, unoriginality and consumption of the „modern times“; on the other hand, tough and ruthless criticism was the only solution to the possible „reform“ in the desirable direction. There was too much motion in the period to be able to stand back and consider things with a sufficiently distant „detached view“.

It was this swift flow of disputes into which Masaryk plunged with his individual view, although *The Czech Question* of 1895 was neither his first nor his last contribution to the topic. Masaryk's whole literary and political work revolves around the topic and therefore it is not possible to take this text out of its broader context. It does, however, have its specific place and character, particularly with respect to the declaration of its title.

This specific character comes from the very conception of the work. Masaryk writes in the first sentences of the preface that he intends to analyse the problem from the point of view of sociology, not politics. Whatever my view of this may be, I cannot help feeling that the contrary is true. Nowadays, this work could possibly be regarded as political, but at the time of its origin it had and indeed still has very little in common with real sociological analysis. Masaryk was, of course, familiar with the sociology of the day, but as an author he was also able to present it in a remarkable way, as for instance in his doctoral thesis and in a number of other texts.

We can only guess at Masaryk's real reasons for presenting his work thus. Perhaps he really believed he was dealing with the original sociology of the Czech question. He perceived the society in which he lived largely through the Czech politics of the time, which of course was for him a more than sufficient subject of criticism. And he urgently reminded that society what it should be like.

There is, however, another possible explanation. Masaryk must have known that he had written a political work in which he had fallen back on history to justify his basic

thesis – that the Czech question is a question of humanity and religion. At the same time and for a number of reasons he did not want to and could not write an historical work. He treated historical facts and dates as „sociological data“ in the sense of his conception. It can be seen as understandable, in view of the state of the political literature of the day, that he did not term his work political, as the common Czech political pamphlets could hardly claim any scientific value.

Two problems arise at this point. The very fact that Masaryk drew on historical matter and arranged it in a certain way inevitably aroused a reaction in the circles of professional historians. Masaryk not only gave his own reasons for the „meaning of Czech existence“ and perhaps the „sociology of Czech history“, but he also created, intentionally or not, a particular scheme of periodisation and therefore a certain philosophical-historical conception of Czech history as such. Moreover, he crossed swords with historians all the more when he dared touch on modern history, i.e. in his analysis of 19th century developments, ground almost untrodden by historians at that time. I find it a very important and still underestimated fact that the first notable works of professional historians on the developments of the 19th century were published only after Masaryk had published his *Czech Question*. From the point of view of research it was certainly a disadvantage, although welcome from the point of view of Masaryk's conception and intentions. If the historians of the day did not regard the 19th century as „history“, for which various reasons were given, then Masaryk of course was not tied by any historiographical conception in his explanation of the 19th century and he could state with clear conscience that his work was nonhistorical.

The reality was, however, more complex. In studying and selecting historical material and facts, Masaryk inevitably depended on existing historical studies; he therefore indirectly took over a particular view of history. The classical history of the 19th century – the Czech positivistic history of the end of the 19th century being in some way a completion of this tendency – reduced the historical process to religious, political and cultural history. Moreover, the whole process was often, for quite topical political reasons, „nationalised“. Nations as „legal and moral beings“ (Palacký) were basically standard categories, „natural“ components of the human community. Therefore it was possible to construct Czech, German, Hungarian etc. history back to the very distant past and „nationalise“ medieval state formations and political systems as their „own“ national property. This conception made it possible to look in a relatively non-historical way for rises and falls in the life of the national community, periods of flourishing and „revival“ and, conversely, periods of dark ages, dormancy and paralysis.

Masaryk took into account this way of conceiving history, using it to justify his own theses. The history of Czech literature met him halfway, as the first great synthesis of modern Czech literature was then under way (Jaroslav Vlček and his school). He accepted the term of national language and literary revival as it became common in the literature of the Czech environment in the 1880s, but his aims went further: the linguistic and literary revival was for him simply a means and an outer demonstration of a moral revival, in which lay the very essence and core of the meaning of Czech existence.

Masaryk had no further need of historians. In the sense of his conception of realism (it is necessary to reveal things in their essence and see their changeability over time as mere „phenomenal“ form) he sought and found „genuine Czech national feeling“, i.e. the essence of the special Czech nature, in the humanity of the reformation Brethren. The

more the national community approached the „self-awareness“ of this essence, the more it lived a really authentic life and flourished in all ways. On the other hand, the more it lost this consciousness and became more distant from itself, the more it declined, placing its very existence in jeopardy. Once found and recognised, the essence was the criterion for the quality of the national existence and life. At the same time, Masaryk could be even more sure that his ideas were not in great contradiction to the basic outline of Czech history: the Czech reformation was generally understood as the real rise of the Czech national feeling, while the „non-Czech“ anti-reformation was a clear cause of its gradual decline. It was therefore only natural that Masaryk saw in the modern national reformation efforts a „return to the basics“, i.e. to the original genuine Czech feeling and he nominated it as „the second Czech reformation“. The Czech question for him was not state-political or nation-political, linguistic or literary, but in fact religious. Thus it could have and in his conception did have a more general, broader human meaning. Only as such, could or could it not have some sense as a „world question“.

This way of defining the Czech question immediately became and continues to be a frequent cause of embarrassment and misunderstanding, although Masaryk himself gave a clear explanation and „opened the essence of existence itself“, in particular in the *Ideály humanitní* (Ideals of Humanity) of 1901 and in a number of discussions, studies and speeches. Whoever Masaryk was, a professor of philosophy and sociology, president of the Czechoslovak Republic, a politician and a member of parliament, I see him above all as a great religious thinker and reformer. This was the essence of his personality and all his public activities – the stances he adopted to questions of various kinds originated in this. And it was precisely this side which, for various reasons, used to be pushed to the background. To this very day there has perhaps been no really expert and systematic interpretation of Masaryk’s work. The fact that Masaryk was very critical of all institutionalised forms of religious feeling and belief does not alter the matter. On the contrary, he was perhaps the only European thinker at the turn of the century who was strictly against the Catholic Church in particular, not from the point of view of materialism or positivism, but from the point of view of higher, gospel-inspired spirituality. Man trying to achieve „godlikeness“ (Palacký) and „humanness“ (Masaryk often used the singular, for instance when he distinguished strictly between democracy as the rule of people and anthropocracy as the rule of man) were the central motifs of Masaryk’s religious reflections, although they had very little in common with religion conceived in terms of the church. If the „Masaryk question“ is still open, then it is especially so on this point.

It is important to point out here that through his conception of the Czech question, Masaryk brought a much deeper awareness of the inner character of the Czech feeling and a qualitatively new content to Czech national awareness and nationalism. Against the often meaningless and „flag-waving“ political or cultural (language) nationalism, which rarely needed any more profound reasons and was often intolerant, Masaryk set his national awareness, conceived in terms of humanity, which was fundamentally tolerant in its very essence and moral reasoning. Masaryk defined Czech national awareness as „self-awareness“ and not in opposition and therefore in possible confrontation with the awareness of other nations. Schauerian questions in the form in which they had originally been posed were for him no longer questions.

The whole matter did however have its tricky points. As Masaryk put the categories of humanity and human brotherhood in very close relation to Czech feeling, he gave

the latter certain generally human dimensions, but at the same time a certain exclusive messianic role, and he confirmed ideas about the overall positive content of real Czech feeling. With respect to the fact that the humanity of the brethren was more an ideal than a reality in Czech society towards the end of the last century, it was often possible to question humanity in various political disputes and clashes in senses which did not correspond or were contradictory to Masaryk's intentions.

Masaryk's *The Czech Question* was one of the most important Czech political works of the turn of the century and is today an inspiring historical document, a superb „bit“ from the workshop of the Czech political thinking of the time. As a possible pattern of (sociological, historical etc.) interpretation of the Czech question it is, both in detail and as a whole, antiquated. Indeed, Masaryk himself contributed to this to a considerable degree! (The exception is the religious-reforming dimension of Masaryk's thinking, on which point Masaryk probably is not antiquated.)

The first of Masaryk's critics, his colleague and, for a long time, political partner Josef Kaizl, pointed to one of the basic problems of Masaryk's historical construction: in trying to explain the Czech existence wholly from the inside, Masaryk completely ignored or even rejected the stimuli of the enlightenment and liberalism which, together with the historical reminiscence of the Hussite period, had played a role in the creation of the modern Czech consciousness. A void thus appeared between the two „Czech reformations“, in contradiction to reality. The whole problem was later shifted even further by a great dispute concerning the meaning of Czech history in which an influential group of catholic-oriented Czech historians around Josef Pekař attempted to fill this emptiness by a positive appraisal of Baroque Czech feeling as an authentic basis for modern national life. Modern Czech national consciousness was thus derived from three different sources: the Bohemian Brethren (Masaryk), Czech Baroque Catholicism (Pekař) and Czech liberalism reflecting European thinking of the turn of the 18th century (Kaizl).

When Masaryk had an opportunity to solve the Czech question in practice after 1914, he corrected or modified, directly or indirectly, a number of his ideas. He did not and could not accept Pekař's view but he was more open to Kaizl's attitude. If from the mid-1890s, he was to reject in *The Czech Question* the ideals of the French Revolution and its definition of humanity as unacceptable rationalism, in practice after 1914 and indeed in his later texts (*The World Revolution*), he was much more open to the inspiring ideas of the French and American revolutions. The idea of the Czechoslovak state was for him a synthesis of the ideas of the original Bohemian Brethren and the ideals of world democracy. Masaryk certainly felt and knew that by his actions he was writing a new „Czech question“.

At the beginning of the 20th century, another of Masaryk's colleagues, the national economist and sociologist Albín Bráf, pointed indirectly to another dimension of the Czech question completely omitted by Masaryk. He created a conception of three phases of the Czech national revival and he spoke about language and cultural revival (by the middle of the 19th century), political revival (from 1848 until then) and finally about economic revival, which was more or less a task for the future. Unlike Masaryk, Bráf and his disciples were sensitive to the current economic and social problems, perceiving their importance for the further development of Czech society. It is surprising that Masaryk, who published extensive criticism of Marxism shortly after *The Czech Question*, avoided dealing with economic issues in relation to Czech reality. This said, it is understandable

that they did not fit organically into his conception. He did not, however, feel the need to express himself on these issues at a later date and, indeed, did not do so.

From the point of view of contemporary history, Masaryk's interpretations of the Czech past are outdated. The conception of the content of the historical process is different today (it is a structured complex of phenomena of an economic, social, cultural, political or intellectual character, or an anthropological-civilisation process). The state and its functions are today conceived in a different and more distinct way, as well as various legal and political systems. The nation is conceived in a different way today, despite continuous discussions (and in relation to this the very expression „national revival“ in inappropriate). Far greater attention is paid to the legal and technological conditions of individual or group economic activity, to demographic, climatic and other aspects. History, doubtless like any scientific discipline, has no need to search the past for the specific grounds of national existence. It would be pointless either for individual historians or whole teams to search for it as it simply is not there.

Moreover, within one hundred years of the publication of Masaryk's *The Czech Question*, Czech society has undergone a very complicated and often difficult development; in spite of this, it is today politically and culturally quite clearly a member of the European community (regardless of the actual administrative participation in official structures). After the essential system changes at the end of the 1980s (the analogy with the conditions one hundred years ago is clear), it also has the opportunity to become a really modern civil national society. I have the feeling that if Masaryk were writing his *Czech Question* today, he would cast off the „historical crutch“, although the idea of human brotherhood, not conceived as an exclusively Czech quality, but included in the message from the ancestors, is a value which cannot be questioned. The more so in that so far, it has had too little weight in the liberty – equality – fraternity triangle. The problem of human brotherhood is no abstract idea today, but a concrete matter (Masaryk, as is well-known, liked things in concreto) concerning the personal, mental and physical culture and hygiene of the individual.

It is in this that I ultimately see the real essence of the Czech question of today.

OTTO URBAN studied and later specialised in history at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University, Prague. He was a Humboldt Foundation Scholar at the University of Heidelberg (1969-1970) became from 1968 a research assistant and in 1989 a lecturer. In 1992, he became Professor of Czechoslovak History at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University. His specialises in Czech and Central European History of the 19th and 20th Centuries. In 1982, he published the work, *Czech Society 1848-1918, the German*, adapted version appearing in 1994.