

## GUILTY BY ASSOCIATION: RESEARCHING A PARIAH POLITICAL PARTY

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Protest politics, in its myriad forms, is something we have been witnessing globally with an ever-increasing frequency. While some might view it as the “purview” of political science, some researchers may wish to develop a more sophisticated understanding and then drawing on insights from other disciplines is extremely useful. Anthropology, with its historical background of studying phenomena outside the western setting, including protest movements (such as millennial movements), can provide an angle that political science might overlook or never consider. In addition, anthropology also has much to offer in terms of methodology. The contributions of ethnographic fieldwork, and participant observation in particular, are the focus of this article and my argument will in large part be based on my own original research, which centred on the members and sympathisers of the Czech based “Workers’ Party for Social Justice”. This political party sees itself as radical and anti-establishment, it has links to the far-right underground scene, and protest activities in the form of various marches constitute its major political strategy. First, I conducted my research “at a distance” (e.g., by examining various extreme right websites and studied statistical information on the extreme right available on the website of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic), but then I engaged in participant observation. On the basis of a comparison of the two approaches I shall demonstrate that avoiding close-up research and relying solely on Internet research, surveys, questionnaires, journalistic accounts or even on interviews not reinforced by participant observation leads to a distorted picture. I hope to exemplify that there are certain types of data that can only be obtained through participant observation and thus that certain research questions can only be answered through this methodological tool. Furthermore, I shall show that participant observation helps to generate original data and offer innovative interpretations unavailable from studies relying on other methods. A case in point is the protest politics practised by far-right entities.

KEYWORDS: far right, Czech Republic, participant observation, pariah political party, methods

In this article I wish to draw attention to the fact that protest politics is not only adopted by groups, we, its researchers, sympathise with, but also by groups whose ideas and aims we may find abhorrent. One such group – the Czech based “Workers’ Party for Social Justice” – among which I conducted research in 2011 – has been on my radar for some time. The party usually labelled far-right, ultranationalist and extremist by outsiders, sees itself as radical and anti-establishment. In 2011, I was keen to explore neo-Nazism in the Czech Republic. And since it was known that part of the

membership of the “Workers’ Party” came from the far-right underground, including neo-Nazi elements within it, I decided to approach members of this party.

The party was founded in 2002 as the “Workers’ Party” and after being dissolved in 2010 by the Supreme Court, it re-formed and renamed itself as the “Workers’ Party for Social Justice”. The party has so far remained on the periphery of political life. In terms of electoral performance, the party has never been successful at the national or regional level, not once obtaining a single seat in the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate. It has fared somewhat better at the level of municipal politics, however. In 2006, the “Workers party” managed to win a total of three seats in municipal elections and in 2010, two seats. Both of these electoral gains were made in north-west Bohemia, a region with a strong Roma presence and characterised by strained relationships between the Roma and non-Roma communities. This pattern of zero success in national and regional elections and quite limited in municipal elections has continued since my research concluded. To this point in time, the party has achieved its best electoral results in the 2014 municipal elections, gaining five seats, three of which were won in the small town of Duchcov in north Bohemia (see the “Workers’ Party for Social Justice” website for further details). Despite its low popularity among the general population and despite low levels of reported crimes committed by its members and sympathisers (see reports published on the Ministry of the Interior website and reports on the website of the Czech intelligence agency called *BIS*), it has attracted disproportionately high levels of interest from the media and has been very much under the scrutiny of the authorities for many years. The Ministry of the Interior, in particular, in their annual reports has presented far right and far left groups as the biggest (and only) threats to Czech society.

Prior to entering this field of study, I familiarised myself with the existing literature on the Czech far-right; literature produced primarily by political scientists, as well as that emanating from the far right itself. I also delved into the Czech section of the Stormfront Internet forum, the website of the “Workers’ Party” as well as a variety of other far-right underground websites, particularly the Antifa website, and finally, journalistic coverage of my future informants. Once I initiated my fieldwork I began to notice that the focus of my research changed a great deal – to the point that I found my original research question becoming irrelevant, and where I started to conceptualise my informants in a different way other than those who researched and published on the Czech far right (Charvát 2007; Mareš 2003; Mareš and Vejvodová 2006; Mareš and Vejvodová 2011). However, after further reading on the topic was able to identify a number of parallels between my own findings and those of certain other scholars, particularly Hilary Pilkington in her work on Russian skinheads (2010) and later on the English Defence League (2016). Other parallels were discernible in Arlie Hochschild’s (2016) account of Tea Party supporters from the USA’s Deep South, Agnieszka Pasieka’s (2017; 2019) insights into the (primarily) Polish far right and Katrine Fangen’s work (1998a; 1998b) on Norwegian skinheads and the Norwegian far right. Although

these scholars had researched groups other than the “Workers’ Party”, what they and I all shared was the key method all we all employed, participant observation. What needs underscoring here is that the far-right is a phenomenon which is of interest to scholars from a variety of disciplines. Each discipline offers a distinctive lens and utilises different methods in its studies, which have specific strengths and shortcomings. As a result, each disciplinary tradition can make different contributions but none less invaluable than the other in our quest to grasp the given phenomenon (in this case, the far right). Anthropology, with its participant observation method can therefore provide an angle that political science, for example, with its emphasis on the use of surveys and experiments, might overlook or never consider. The opposite, of course, equally holds true.

However, it is also true that those of us who opt for participant observation of the far-right often meet with suspicion from our colleagues who work outside of anthropology. Agnieszka Pasięka (2019) sees the source of this problem in an assumption – arguably not fully conscious – that ethnographic work requires a degree of sympathetic empathy for the people an ethnographer works with. For a long time, she argues, there has been a presupposition that we must like the people we study, lest we cannot comprehend them. Similarly, Hilary Pilkington (2016) also met with similar hostility within the academic community. Such a researcher is “guilty by association,” she asserted, and the researcher who wishes to study the far right, in order to “keep their hands clean”, either has to use methods that keep the researcher physically distant from the researched, such as questionnaires or analysis of secondary materials, or he/she has to make explicit statements underlining their disapproval of the views of their informants. Undoubtedly, although those who work closely with people from the far-right end of the political spectrum can sometimes encounter suspicion from their academic colleagues, if our aim is the informants’ perspective as a point of analytic departure, participant observation is indispensable. My own aim was to provide an ethnographic picture of the emic perspective and in this way contribute to this multi-disciplinary area of study.

It should go without saying that this area of research can be an ethical minefield. Aware of the numerous ethical challenges permeating research of the extreme right, I studied and drew on the codes of ethics of the Association of Social Anthropologists in the UK and the Commonwealth, the American Anthropological Association, ESRC and *Česká asociace pro sociální antropologii* (the Czech Association for Social Anthropology). When contacting my informants (initially through emails), I was completely upfront with them regarding my position as a researcher, the identity of my funding body, my university, and my area of interest. When I attended my very first “Workers’ Party” meeting I reiterated who I was and my reasons for wishing to meet them. Prior to interviewing each participant, I negotiated informed consent. This, I did even with repeated interviews with the same person. Although my informants were usually

amused and sometimes annoyed by it, I found it necessary, if only to keep reminding them that I was an outsider and thus allowing them to make informed decisions as to what to divulge to me or not. I informed the research participants that I would use pseudonyms for people's names and the names of places. In addition, never did I take photographs or record videos of anything or anyone during the course of my fieldwork. However, I was candid with them that – my best efforts to ensure their anonymity notwithstanding – anonymity might still be compromised. Throughout my study, the safety, dignity and privacy of my research participants were utmost on my mind and I wanted to conduct myself (both in the field and since exiting the field) in a way that would not hinder potential future research of other scholars who would wish to approach and work with my informants.

#### WHY METHODS MATTER

In hindsight, some of my data could not be garnered except through participant observation and this method enabled me to better interpret or work with data obtained through other methods. Before some specific examples are provided, let me very briefly consider some drawbacks of the methods routinely used in research of the far-right in sociology and political science.

Studies utilizing questionnaires have two main drawbacks. Firstly, they usually closely mirror the currently held views of the researcher. The researcher might thus effectively, albeit unwittingly, corroborate his/her preconceived ideas. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) observed that explicit questions in surveys only give the answers the researcher already “knows” or anticipates and that they thus merely confirm the researcher's prejudices. The second methodological shortcoming is that statistical data obtained from questionnaires does not tell us anything, in Bourdieu's terms, about “the logic of practice”, “the generative principles of human behaviour” (1984). “The logic of practice”, according to Bourdieu, can only be revealed through observation of actors' behaviour.

Research founded on or relying primarily on an analysis of far-right websites can be equally problematic. Whilst Miller and Slater (2000) argued that the Internet has become an “integral aspect of people's daily lives” (2000, 193), rather than altering reality for them, Les Back (2002), who studied the content of far right websites and chat rooms, concluded that online and off-line identities of these people differ, in the sense that “white” identities are amplified in the world of the Internet. I am of the opinion that the key message here is that we cannot exclusively focus on the online self-presentation of people we wish to comprehend. Unless simultaneous study of both on-line and off-line behaviour of a given group is conducted, we cannot safely determine if on-line and off-line behaviours are consistent, nor can we discern whether the ideas presented on the Internet are expressions of someone's desires or constitute merely specific performances.

Particular caution should be paid when drawing on journalistic writing as a source. Media bias (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Eberl, Boomgaarden and Wagner 2015), mediocracy and the Overton window<sup>1</sup> – are all involved in the actual practice of news production and as a result, journalistic accounts simply cannot be taken at face value.

Of course, participant observation as a method also has its limitations, such as problems with generalisability and subjectivity, inconsistency and barriers to access. However, if the comprehension of people termed far right, extreme right, neo-Nazis and neo-fascists is a desired goal, the researcher must engage with them as “full” human beings, rather than as one-dimensional caricatures. Knowledge of what they say should be acquired from far right websites, their media appearances, demonstrations and indirectly through voting preferences and knowledge of what they say they do (in interviews, for example) should be imbibed, but if people’s interest lies in *what it is they actually do* – and if these aforementioned people wish to explore the discrepancy between these different modes of engagement with the world, then participant observation is indispensable. In addition, once the people who self-identify or are labelled as “far right” become known to us, we can establish in what ways and to what extent their sub-cultures differ from other sub-cultures of a given society. Equipped with such ethnographic knowledge, conclusions can be drawn as to how far right cultures relate to a wider cultural context and the data serves as a springboard for further theorising.

## NATIONALISM

When I started to systematise my fieldnotes I observed a number of patterns that took me by surprise. The first thing to note is that my informants rejected virtually all the labels that were pinned on them by their political opponents, such as journalists and scholars. Furthermore, they would not of their own accord locate themselves on the left-right political spectrum. When I raised this in interviews – some decidedly positioned themselves on the left, but many were irritated by the question itself. They were unhappy with such “pigeonholing”, dismissing it as an anachronism. They added that if push came to shove, they would situate themselves on the left of the spectrum. Only one of my informants confessed that years previously he had labelled himself

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1 The Overton window is a concept referring to the range of permissible attitudes towards social issues in any given society at any given time. The Overton window tends to shift over time in line with the evolution of societal norms and values. Politicians striving for the largest possible number of voters pursue policies within the Overton Window. Mediocracy, meaning power of the media or rule by the media, is an expression denoting the power of the mass media to shape what people think about (though not necessarily what they think). Media bias is one of the terms used to describe reporting that does not live up to the ideal of providing voters with balanced and objective information on relevant political topics. Such reporting is partial to certain political positions and/actors over others.

a right-winger. Then he clarified that this was no longer the case and that the “Workers Party” had left leanings.

Almost all my informants unanimously defined themselves as radical and national socialists. They always stressed to me that nationalism and socialism were two sides of the same coin and that they saw them as firmly intertwined. In contrast, most scholars writing about the Czech far right overemphasised my informants’ identification with nationalism, which they routinely associated with racism and xenophobia, but virtually ignored their attachment to socialism. (A typical narrative also holds sway in a lot of work on the original National Socialists, the Nazis.) It is perhaps easy to overemphasise the racist element within the far right, especially when relying on far-right websites for insight. Eyes are drawn to those individuals who stand out visually, due to their sinister-looking tattoos or paramilitary uniforms and not to those who look ordinary. Strong rhetoric is taken note of and not commonplace utterances and attention is paid to reports on far-right crimes. Prior to entering the field, I was no different. However, my fieldnotes revealed that my informants’ unrehearsed comments tended to focus on their concerns with the economy, domestic and international politics, social injustice, and the pre-1989 socialist era and not *per se* on nationalism, ethnic minorities and other issues. I came to learn about their ideas of the nation/ethnicity/race mostly in semi-structured interviews, when I asked specific questions concerning, for example, their views on the nation.

This does not mean that the nationalism of my informants was unworthy of examination. I was somewhat taken aback by how negative these self proclaimed nationalist views of the Czechs as a nation were. Materialism, but especially passivity and subservience, were offered to me as typical Czech features. When I pressed my informants in interviews to list the positive attributes of the Czech people (and I usually indeed had to press), most identified being good with their hands as something typical of Czechs and some added the propensity to work hard. Importantly, Czechs at large also associate these two qualities with “Czechness”.

Quite a few members of the far-right I encountered found generalisations concerning the Czechs or any other nation problematic and refused to generalise – and this was conveyed to me as a genuine belief-another unexpected realisation to me.

Overall, conditioned by online research, specifically by Stormfront discussions, and various far-right websites (that I hasten to add have been taken down since then) I was expecting somewhat rigid definitions, appeals to racial purity, and talk of racial hierarchies. But to my initial surprise, during my time in the field I never encountered anyone who claimed to believe in purity as such. Some of my informants in one-to-one interviews were aware of Czechs being relatively mixed and specifically stated there was no such thing as a pure nation, race or clear boundaries between people. Others stressed the genetic as well as cultural links with neighbouring Germans – a view present day Czech intellectuals endorse and genetic science supports. But my interviews

showed that a majority were uninterested in these matters. Somewhat paradoxically, there was simultaneously widespread agreement that “sticking to one’s kind” was an ideal worth striving for. In addition, and equally paradoxically, the informants from the Moravian part of the country had a strong regional identity, which they defined in contrast to that of Czechs.

With regards to those of my informants who considered themselves to be semi-Germans – when these informants said things such as “Germans are culturally more advanced, and the cooperation of Czechs and Germans is good” (words of one of my key informants at our very first meeting), or “Just as the Hussites and Catholics lived together as one, so did Czechs and Germans live here together as brotherly nations” (one of the speakers at the 1<sup>st</sup> of May demonstration in Prague in 2012), or “Finally, I have a German surname” (a female informant confided in me at her own wedding reception) – these statements reflect the fact that Germans were perceived by many of my far-right informants as close and intertwined with Czechs, but that the German element was somewhat superior and more prestigious. In this respect, many members of the Czech far right are closer to the post-89 reinterpretation of Czech history held by professional historians – though not necessarily the rest of the population. But my informants’ appreciation of German civilisation and view of Germans as a civilising element in Czech lands went further still. From my analysis of the Czech section on Stormfront from the year 2011 and from things overheard directly when my informants were less on their guard (usually after drinking large amounts of alcohol), many of them identified with the German occupiers during WWII and virtually no one with the Czech resistance. Germans were thought highly of for “what they achieved during Second World War” and a lot of admiration was professed particularly for the “ordinary German soldier”, who was commended for his bravery and resilience. (The contrast with Švejk,<sup>2</sup> a Czech anti-hero, is noteworthy here.)

This situation is not dissimilar to, though not a direct equivalent of, Euroasianism, a form of nationalist ideology that has gained some currency within the Russian federation after 1991 (Humphrey 2002).<sup>3</sup> Euroasianism, claiming to combine the spirituality, mysticism and collectivism of the “East” and the rational, technologically advanced

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2 Švejk is the main character of Jaroslav Hašek’s novel „The Good Soldier Švejk“ (or „Schweik“), published between 1921–1923. Švejk is a Czech soldier who voluntarily enlists at the front during the First World War to fight for Austria-Hungary. During the war, Švejk literally follows the orders of his superiors, always displaying enthusiasm for these orders. This behaviour actually embarrasses the authorities and leads to a number of comical situations. Švejk is a rather hard character to grasp and is interpreted in different ways – from being a fool to a genius pretending to be stupid. In any case, the novel is understood as a mockery of the authorities, whether it is Švejk himself doing the mocking or the author – through his character of Švejk. The novel is also often considered to be a critique of war and its senselessness.

3 However, this is not to be mistaken for Chris Hann’s understanding of Euroasia.

and individualistic characteristics of the “West”, offers poorer Inner Asian regions of the Russian federation above all, “an escape from their peripherality, obscurity and insignificance” (Humphrey 2002, 265). To achieve this, Humphrey writes, that the provincial Euroasianists in present-day Russia “often carefully ignore previous regimes of difference and even downplay historical episodes of terror and repression” (Humphrey 2002, 262). I argue that when my informants choose to emphasise the peaceful coexistence of Czechs and Germans in Czech lands through the centuries, and especially when they express their awe of “German achievements during WWII,” they too, similarly to provincial Euroasianists, have to soft-pedal or completely disregard the repression and terror Czechs experienced at the hand of their more powerful and “advanced” German neighbours.

And yet these “semi-Germans” interacted quite benignly with “full-blooded Slavs”. On Stormfront, I encountered participants who quite straightforwardly could be described as neo-Nazis in their self-presentation and views, yet simultaneously posted links to a website promoting Slavic heritage or greatly admired Serbs and frequented the Serbian section of the Stormfront forum, for instance. This ambivalence can also be exemplified with reference to one of my informants. This young man was very pro-German and informed me he did not like the idea of pan-Slavism, Czechs seeing themselves as cohabiting with Russia in one imagined universe. He was also not keen on National Awakening. He also detested the Czech fascism of the 1930s. Yet, it was he who on his own initiative organised an academic lecture on Grand Moravia<sup>4</sup> for his party comrades. And it was also he who alerted me to the existence of old Slavic settlements in the town of Brno and told me about how he once took part in a (neo-pagan) ritual performed on the site of one of these settlements. Another example is one of the closest friendships I encountered, between a pan-Slav and neo-Nazi. Both also signalled their ideological beliefs very openly through their sartorial choices – the pan-Slav often wore a Perun T-shirt, his neo-Nazi friend was rarely seen without his Valhalla hoodie and his body was covered in tattoos pointing to his ideological leanings. Once when I had drinks with them in a pub, I even witnessed their discussion over whether the Czechs were Slavs or Germans. The man who had a penchant for Slavic paganism seemed to be winning the argument. However, the discussion was conducted in a friendly spirit and both men, together with another man present, who primarily was a devotee of regional Moravian patriotism, concluded the discussion by saying: “*Stejně sme pičovskej národ!*” (“Anyway, we are a nation of cunts!”).

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4 The so called Great Moravian Empire (*Velkomoravská říše*) or Great/Grand Moravia (*Velká Morava*) was a state unit of the Western Slavs that existed in the years 833–906. At the time of its greatest territorial expanse it included Moravia, Slovakia, Bohemia, Southern Poland, Silesia and Pannonia. Within this state unit, Christianity spread and Slavic writing was established.



If at the level of ideology my informants' nationalism was rather eclectic or hybrid – in their everyday lives my informants were even more relaxed, and their behaviour often contradicted with that of their public discourse. To start with, my informants were definitely not interested in each other's "pedigree". Antifa certainly revelled in publishing on its website piquant stories about those members of various neo-Nazi organisations or the "Workers' Party" who turned out to be of partly Jewish or Roma ancestry, or who were discovered to be gay. Nonetheless, relatively early during my fieldwork I started noticing that in practice the Czech far right did not vet its membership in terms of ethnic background.

I recall, for instance, that when I attended a Sports Day event organised by the "Workers' Youth" (the youth wing of the "Workers' Party"), I suspected that one of the sportsmen participating had some Roma ancestry. I was also a witness to a situation when at one meeting of the "Workers' Youth", a new application form was under discussion by members of one of the local organisations. The applicant was a young girl from the town of Most (a town in northern Bohemia with a sizeable Roma population and conflicts between the Roma and non-Roma groups) who had attached her photo. "Černoška", meaning a black (African) woman, was the very first comment uttered by one of the men looking at the application form, and everyone laughed. Immediately afterwards, all the men present gathered around the picture and started admiring the beauty of this highly attractive dark-skinned girl, whose appearance suggested to me some Roma ancestry. Whilst I do not know whether the girl was admitted in the end into the organisation or not, not once did I hear at that meeting a suggestion that she should not be accepted due to her questionable ethnic origin. In fact, my informants fancying Roma girls – whether in general or a specific female – was something I witnessed on a number of occasions. Those informants that did so, admitted this quite candidly to their far-right friends, who, in turn, reacted to such confessions with some sympathy. Rather than purely sexualising and thus dehumanising the Roma women in such conversations, I sensed a degree of frustration on the part of my informants. This frustration arose from belonging to an "incompatible culture", as one of my informants put it, that prevented the formation of romantic relationships.

But perhaps the most bizarre situation arose when once after attending a concert I slept over at the place of one of my informants, together with another member of the party. In the morning, the host treated his fellow party member to some beer and started showing him his collection of newspapers and magazines from the *Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren*<sup>5</sup> (the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia) period. The guest started browsing through them with some interest and remarked that the magazines were interesting as they had historical value. And then he added that he did not

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5 The name for the part of Czechoslovakia that was annexed and occupied by Nazi Germany from 16<sup>th</sup> March 1939 to 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> May 1945.

like what he had seen at the concert, namely some young men giving the Sieg Heil salute. Then he told us that he was born three years after the end of the WWII and that his mother was partly of Jewish descent and his uncle had been held captive in a concentration camp. His town, he continued, had a sizeable German and Jewish population and Yiddish was spoken widely – which he demonstrated by uttering a number of Yiddish words. The host did not react in any particular way to this piece of information, and I was quite amazed how casually the guest disclosed his Jewish origins. What the guest did not know, but I already did at the time, was that the host was partly Jewish, too. One of his parents had a grandparent or a great-grandparent who was Jewish, although the man was not entirely sure which as he had no contact with that part of his family. *À propos*, his Jewish background was known to his close friend, one of the most prominent members of the Party, who was incidentally had a liking for “all things Germanic”.

In their interactions with people outside the far-right scene, I also observed that my informants interacted with various foreigners, second-generation immigrants and sometimes even Roma a lot better than they realised and would like to admit. They worked with them, lived in the same neighbourhoods and went to the same schools. But in their public discourse my informants were adamant that a multicultural society was unworkable, at best a naïve fantasy and at worst something pernicious. And in private they presented coexistence to me as a source of irritation and stress. Despite this, in real life they voluntarily shopped in ethnic minority stores, attended mixed venues, and even openly fancied them. Thus, there was certainly some contradiction between their ideal of sticking to their own kind and the more relaxed practice they employed in practice. This contradiction remained unbeknownst to the people amongst whom I did research.

All of this begs questions, which I had already started posing to myself whilst still in the field, namely how extreme my informants were and how intense was their xenophobia. In both their unrehearsed conversations and the interviews I conducted with them, informants certainly expressed dislike, suspicion and even hatred of certain ethnic groups. However – and this is significant – my participant observation and various surveys commissioned by governments and media (see, for example, the attitudinal surveys carried out by the STEM agency for the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic for 2010) revealed that my informants’ attitudes to various others were essentially mainstream. Although there was some individual variation in my informants’ views, when taken as a whole they shared more or less the same dislikes and fears of – or likes and admiration for – a variety of others as the rest of the population – and provided identical or similar justifications for these views. For example, in relation to the Roma, the relationship of my informants with this minority also to a large extent mirrored that of wider society. At the time of my fieldwork, 85% of survey respondents admitted holding a negative view of this minority. The research

also showed that this negative position was more likely to be encountered amongst people who lived in areas with a strong Roma presence. The Roma were certainly the minority most detested by my informants, but, similar to the rest of the population, those of my informants who did not share living and working space with the Roma were relatively unconcerned.

The point I am trying to make is that placing sole reliance on online sources where powerful and/or extreme nationalistic and racist discourse reigns presents an inaccurate picture of the Czech far-right and possibly other far-right groupings elsewhere. Perhaps uncomfortably so. Ascertaining that my informants are not markedly at odds with the rest of society is more unnerving than “writing them off” as an extreme and pathological element within it. My participant observation made me contemplate the heterogeneity and hybridity of my informants’ nationalism/s. To me this suggests that what is occurring in reality is all part of a process of searching for (or the construction of) a new, suitable, dignified national identity, one compatible with post 1989-era circumstances. (Before 1989, Czechoslovakia occupied a relatively prestigious position within the former socialist bloc. After 1989, the country was (re)incorporated into the “western world” – where it was relegated to its margins.) This merits further investigation.

## SOCIALISM

My fieldwork compelled me to take my informants’ references to socialism seriously. And this is a different approach than the one usually adopted by regional scholars specialising in the Czech far right and the “Workers’ Party”. These scholars engage very little with the “Workers Party’s” appeals for socialism and social justice, treating these appeals more like a smokescreen designed to divert attention away from their “real intentions”. Instead, Czech social scientists concentrate on finding links between the “Workers’ Party” and other far right entities including Nazism and neo-Nazism (Mareš 2003; Charvát 2007). To do this, they focus on these groups’ official discourse and scrutinise the symbolism they employ. This has serious repercussions in real life as many of these scholars also cooperate with the Czech government, judiciary and possibly the BIS (the national intelligence service). A case in point is the political scientist Michal Mazel who served as an expert witness during the 2010 Supreme Court hearing, which ultimately ended with the dissolution of the “Workers’ Party”. The party’s logo played a major part in this dissolution as the prosecution argued that the logo, a cogwheel with the letters DS (standing for *Dělnická strana*/Workers’ Party) in it, resembled the logo of the Free German Workers’ Party (*Freiheitliche Deutsche Arbeiter Partei*), a post-WW2 neo-Nazi movement, as well as that of the German Labour Front (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*), a Nazi trade union that came into existence in the Weimar

Republic after Hitler's ascent to power. In his defence the chairman of the "Workers' Party" at the court hearing argued that the cogwheel had been a common symbol of many factories throughout the ages. He also claimed that his party was building on the workers' movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I do not wish to downplay the similarities of the "Workers' Party" to Nazi and neo-Nazi organisations. My research confirms that some members of the party had connections with the far right underground and, indeed, at first glance the symbolism the party has employed throughout the years shows a likeness to that of some Nazi organisations, particularly the use of symbols resembling the swastika. However, if anything is to be understood about the contemporary Czech far right, and potentially the recent far-right shift throughout the western world, then a fixation primarily on outward signs of similarity with Nazi Germany is not the most useful starting point. Current motivating factors, be they economic, political, affective and others also need to be looked at. Furthermore, paying insufficient attention to the "social" element and giving it short shrift in relation to populist labels, can give undue weight to psychological explanations for the existence of the Czech far right, or indeed other far rights, which I find problematic.

I would like to turn now to the prevalent view or views held by my informants as to what role the economy should play in society and how society and its economy should ideally be organised. Official discourse on this can be extrapolated from the content of the "Workers' Party" website, from analyses of speeches by various speakers delivered at demonstrations, and from media appearances of the party's chairman Tomáš Vandas and the content of his book "From Republicans to the Workers' Party" (*Od republikánů k Dělnické straně*) (2012). Essentially, it boils down to the following:

The role of the state is perceived to be protective and supervisory, and its duty is first and foremost, or perhaps even exclusively, to look after its citizens. This means providing them with certainties such as employment, looking after those unable to find gainful employment (due to old age, disability, or those actively searching for work), guaranteeing fair wages as well as dignified working conditions, fair prices of goods, good-quality healthcare and education. The state should also support families, so that it is possible for young people to start their own families, and to ensure their citizens' safety. Furthermore, the state should be of assistance to Czech businesses and must own all strategic industries and infrastructure, such as the energy industry. Finally, the state should also explicitly promote "healthy nationalism" as a value. Obligations of fit and able citizens include working hard and obeying the law. If everyone does their fair share, then "a rising tide lifts all boats". My informants believe that most people are decent, hard-working as well as law-abiding. However, they are being forced to live in uncertainty and are struggling to make ends meet. In addition, they are worried for their safety, their future, and, unable to receive justice, leading to passivity taking root. The state is therefore obviously not fulfilling its obligations. The root cause is to be

found in the fostering of the individualistic ethos. The promotion of individualism as a value – and my younger informants would equally emphasise the promotion of capitalism as an economic system – is catastrophic for the (Czech) nation-state. It has led to the emergence of denationalised elites that only follow their own narrow economic interests. Not only do they engage in all sorts of corrupt practices – siphoning off state resources and selling state assets off cheaply – but they are not interested in, or are in fact contemptuous of, their fellow citizens, whom they are meant to serve. They are very happy to follow directives from Brussels and Washington, either for personal gain or through sheer indifference to the interests of their nation. Ultimately, the aim of the “Workers’ Party” is to redress this situation and create an “economy that works for all people”. This needs to be done through the speedy reversal of existing policies and arrangements – that is through the protectionism of domestic industries and workers, through regulations that curtail the excesses of capitalism (such as the exorbitant cost of certain basic goods and services) and through striving for the self-sufficiency of the national economy. To achieve all this, political independence is needed and leaving NATO and EU is therefore paramount.

I was acquainted with this discourse before I embarked on my fieldwork. Nonetheless, once in the field I was struck by how closely this corresponded to my informants’ views expressed in more private settings and how unanimous everyone was with regards to their understanding of the ins and outs of politics and economics and their preferred political and economic order. This discourse was reproduced not only in interviews I conducted in the field, but also cropped up spontaneously in informal chats with me or in conversations I simply overheard. This unanimity was striking by comparison with their nuanced and varied construal of such notions as nation or race.

In fact, already during the first party meeting I attended I encountered in a condensed form some of the main points I encountered later on in the field, time and again. At this meeting, after attending to conventional political party matters, such as a discussion of electoral strategies for the upcoming elections, I was formally introduced to the people there. It only took about two minutes after I explained my presence that I heard one of the older men there saying: “Havel is really loved by the USA. He got rid of our arms industry. So, our people who were employed in this industry have lost their livelihoods – and Americans keep on exporting their arms!”. All those around indicated their agreement. “Privatisation was the biggest theft”, contributed another party member who later continued: “What already belonged to people was being sold to them.” “Fruta and other Czech companies from socialist times are gone now. Sold out!”, said one of the older men there, to the nodding agreement of all those around (Fruta was one of the biggest food companies of socialist times). Other people there started naming local factories and food plants that were no longer “in Czech hands”. “Starobrnno is now owned by Heineken”, a very young boy sitting to my right joined in and added: “Only very small local breweries are still in Czech

ownership.” (Starobrnno was a brewery in Moravia dating back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which always exported to the rest of the country.) Another one of the younger men there said: “I work in agriculture, and I can tell you that only 20% of the food consumed here is produced in the Czech Republic. The rest is all imported. If imports suddenly stopped, we would only survive for several weeks. That’s the maximum”, he elaborated. Then somebody shifted the conversation to how people shop in Tesco, because it is much cheaper. This means – everybody agreed – that all profits go abroad, the state does not benefit, and its coffers are empty. The only available option open to the state is to raise VAT, which it keeps doing. At the same time, local people, for example, those in agriculture, cannot compete with the low prices offered by companies such as Tesco – and go out of business. And this part of the discussion was concluded with some disagreement about the causes and probable consequence of the latest sharp rise in the price of eggs. There were also more general statements such as: “The whole country is going downhill. Look at all the corruption, look at the massive and growing differences between rich and poor!” The men who uttered these words then added something to the effect that under the communists everything was better. Everyone concurred with someone else then remarking that the housing situation was incomparably better under the communists. But then his neighbour disapprovingly pointed out that communists were still in power. “The same people are still there!” he exclaimed emotionally and once again the rest of the people acquiesced. Finally, towards the end of the discussion they were assuring me that they were not extremists, and what they were telling me was something I would hear in any pub anywhere in the country. People just would not dare to say these things in public as they are scared, I was told. Such is the nature of Czechs, was the collective conclusion. They just complain in private and do not dare to speak out openly.

As mentioned earlier, debates such as these were by no means restricted to party meetings. They were never far away and for the most part were not initiated by my presence. Thus, during countless lengthy and boisterous “sessions” at pubs where my informants were having beer with their drinking buddies, the regaling of vivid accounts of drunken exploits and of “funny defecation stories” would alternate with talk of politics and economics where, for example, the extremely low wages of Czech *vis-à-vis* German workers would be discussed and linked to the low purchasing power of Czechs, the subsequent collapse of local businesses, and another increase of VAT. In fact, the concern with politics and economics permeated my informants’ lives to the extent that they perceived their surroundings very much in those terms. Here are a couple of examples. Once, when escorted to the Brno train station by one of my informants, this man, employed by an international food chain, all of a sudden and totally unprompted broke into a tirade about how “no one from here owns anything”. He complained that there were four energy companies, but that only one of them – ČEZ – was 50 percent owned by the government. “These companies can leave any

time they want.”, he said disapprovingly. And then, as we jumped on a tram and rode through the streets of Brno, he kept on pointing out different shops and the regional headquarters of various companies, stressing what was foreign-owned and what had closed down since 1989. “This very tram bears the name of a Czech company, but in reality it is foreign”, he concluded. On another occasion, when travelling on a train with another one of my informants to northern Bohemia, I was sitting silently and enjoying the quite beautiful landscape. My companion must have been enjoying a rather different “landscape” as out of the blue, he started naming the factories we had already passed and factories that we were yet to encounter, informing me which of them were still manufacturing, and which no longer did.

For my younger informants the major problem was capitalism *per se*. Capitalism was spoken of as antisocial by its very nature. And this made capitalism unnatural in the eyes of my informants. As they repeatedly said to me, humankind was based on collectivism and cooperation, not on the pursuit of private interests. Pursuing private self-interest was seen as divisive. And as far as my informants were concerned, collective existence starts with the family and can be applied to higher or wider units – up to the nation. “Every individual family, where children fulfil their duties through diligent studies and parents theirs through stable employment, provides the best conditions for people’s own self-realisation”, said one of my key informants in his impassioned speech at 1<sup>st</sup> May demonstration in Prague. “And that’s precisely how it has to work with the nation”, he continued. “It’s not a coincidence that family and nation share the same word root.” (Family is *rodina* in Czech and nation is *národ*. Both words share the root *rod*, which is also a standalone word that is sometimes translated into English as clan. From the root *rod* also derives the verb *rodit* – to give birth.) Given the inter-connection, as they saw it, between community based on blood ties, cooperation and personal fulfilment, global capitalism was then deemed doubly dangerous. A foreign employer, I was told once during an interview, has no ties to the country and no moral obligation to local workers. It is not a problem for them to exploit the locals and if these locals do not like it and air their grievances, then the employer can simply take his company elsewhere. Other informants would pinpoint having to live off capital as the most disagreeable feature of capitalism.

Finally, whilst these views I have summed up so far were openly and boldly presented to the public, there was an additional layer, absent from the official party line. Namely, many of my informants also believed that this state of affairs was being orchestrated from above – by the international community of Jews. This conspiracy theory is quite universal amongst the far right worldwide and it is something that has been researched quite extensively – both in its origins and pervasiveness in different parts of the world, whether Jews are still present or not. Here I can only add that whilst I did chance upon this trope among my informants every now and then, the domination or rule of Jews in international politics and economics was never elaborated

upon in my presence beyond the statement that “the Jews are behind all the evil in the world” line.

All in all, their position on the economy and the state outlined above was to a greater or lesser degree also replicated among other sections of the population. I encountered versions of this view in my interactions with friends, family, on Internet fora, and overheard it in public spaces, such as public transport. Even the notion of Jews being over-represented in governments and financial institutions worldwide – was not confined to my informants. Once again, the Czech far right was more mainstream than is acknowledged. And this is so despite the fact that people representing this mainstream tend to view the “Workers’ Party” as somewhere between comical, irrelevant and detestable.

The final finding I would like to address here is one that probably would not have occurred had the participant observation method not been employed, namely, how serious and genuine my informants were about their workerist identity.

The contemporary far right anywhere in the western world draws its supporters mostly from among blue-collar workers. However, the “Workers’ Party for Social Justice” is the only contemporary far right party I am aware of that has the word Workers in its name. What is more, “restoration of the prestige of manual work” (the exact wording) is one of the points in their party manifesto. No other political party in the Czech Republic has had such an aim in its party programme. This strong workerist orientation is also evident from the term of address that members and sympathisers of the party use – *kamarádi* (“friends” in the English translation). It is in fact the only term of address I have heard amongst them and is in stark contrast to the term “brothers” that one would conventionally expect from a nationalist party or movement, and that one ordinarily finds already amongst the neighbouring Slovaks, for example. Moreover, other common terms of nationalist repertoire such as blood, soil, and God, are completely absent from the discourse of my informants. This workerist identification is significant all the more because since 1989 the working class in parts of eastern Europe has become somewhat tainted through its association with former communist regimes. And in fact, among my informants, I observed a great deal of inconsistency in relation to the pre-89 era. Despite all their anti-communist rhetoric, their take on the socialist heritage in Czechoslovakia actually wavered somewhere between positive and critical. Finally, the workerist stance (emphasising the significance of manual labour) defies the idea that from the 1970s onwards, people’s identity in post-industrial societies has not been derived from occupations or occupational groups but from consumption (Bourdieu 1984) and as a result people’s identity has been more individualistic and less class based. My data indicates that this is not necessarily always the case. My informants still define themselves through their class and for them the type of work they do does indeed represent a source of identity.

My field data therefore points to the continuing relevance and perhaps reconfiguration of class rather than its disappearance as a form of identity, which is in line



with some of the newer literature on class (Friedman 1994; 2002; Narotzky 2015). In fact, it suggests that in this specific case the workerist identity is actually construed as a viable form of national identity.

The “marriage” of Czech nationalism and workerism has broader historical roots. During my fieldwork, I had the impression that it was quite logical for Czech nationalists to invoke such an identity, as Czechs tend to believe that they are good, if not exceptional, with their hands and often use the expression “golden Czech hands” to capture this notion. A relatively large section of the population believes that Czech products are more “honest”, meaning longer lasting and of better quality, and Czech craftsmen are deemed dextrous and ingenious. In interviews several of my informants actually listed manual dexterity as well as diligence as one of the defining features of Czechness. One of my older informants, in particular, specifically contrasted the Czechs and Germans in this regard to drive this point home. “Well, Czechs can be characterised by quite high creativity. People say that if a German buys something, then the first thing he does is read the instructions.”, he asserted. And then he expanded: “A Czech doesn’t do this. He figures it out for himself.”

The roots of this self-conception are historical. Czechs have traditionally defined themselves in opposition to Germans, juxtaposing German rich capitalists with manually adroit Czech country folk. Indeed, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire the position of ethnic Czechs – economic, political, social – was for the most part inferior to that of ethnic Germans (and later on Jews), as they were mostly peasants, workers, *petite bourgeoisie* and quite a large section of them went to work in Vienna as craftsmen, servants and factory workers. And as Czechs continue to suffer from an inferiority complex regarding the strength and structure of their economy, technological advancement and political importance of their country *vis-à-vis* the “West”, this emphasis on special manual skilfulness as a distinguishing and positive national feature remains in place.

## CONCLUSIONS

Unwillingness to engage with people deemed abhorrent and conducting “research at a distance” is a risky strategy as it may easily lead to misinterpreting and caricaturing these people, as well as distorting issues. The findings of research conducted exclusively “at a distance” might be less messy, theoretically as well as morally, but these findings are also more distant from empirical reality if not supplemented by close-up research. Close-up research can yield different and very valuable data. Removing it from our toolbox cannot serve us well if we want our analysis to have some sort of explanatory or even predictive power.

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