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► To cite this version:

Vitezslav Sommer. Are we still behaving as revolutionaries?: Radovan Richta, theory of revolution and dilemmas of reform communism in Czechoslovakia. *Studies in East European Thought*, 2017, 69 (1), pp.93 - 110. 10.1007/s11212-017-9280-2 . hal-03592471

HAL Id: hal-03592471

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03592471>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2022

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“Are we still behaving as revolutionaries?”: Radovan Richta, theory of revolution and dilemmas of reform communism in Czechoslovakia

Vítězslav Sommer¹

Abstract This article is concerned with the concept of “scientific and technological revolution” (STR) as it was elaborated since the late 1950s and early 1960s by the Czechoslovak philosopher Radovan Richta. The aim of this text is to analyze Richta’s theory of revolution, which was a vital part of his STR research project, and to place it within the wider context of the thinking about revolution in post-war Czechoslovakia. The STR theory of revolution is discussed as part of a longer development from the discourse of “national and democratic revolution” in the immediate post-war years and transformations of the theory of revolution under Stalinism and post-Stalinism to Richta’s attempt to renew and rethink the issue of revolution as a part of the reform communist political and social thinking.

Keywords Czechoslovakia · Scientific and technological revolution · Reform communism · Radovan Richta

Introduction

After the Second World War, communist activists, intellectuals, artists, and policy-makers in East-Central Europe were attracted by the vision of socialist revolution. Their understanding of this phenomenon was rooted in a tradition of Marxist thought as well as in the earlier Soviet experience of building socialism. The issue of revolution occupied a prominent position in numerous theoretical essays, propaganda texts, and official Communist Party documents. However, socialist revolution was not an unchanging entity within the rich conceptual framework of Marxist–Leninist political thought and social theory. It served also as a basis for critical reflections on actually existing state socialism and as a source of innovative

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theorizing about possible future paths of the communist political project. What seemed to be an object of celebratory commemoration and an important part of the historical narrative about the epochal triumph of working class and its political vanguard could also become the starting point for more serious theoretical innovations, with potentially far-reaching consequences for thinking about social change within state socialism.

This present paper is concerned with the concept of “scientific and technological revolution” (STR) as it was elaborated since the late 1950s and early 1960s by the Czechoslovak philosopher Radovan Richta.¹ The aim is to analyze Richta’s theory of revolution, which was a vital part of his STR research project, and to place it within the wider context of thought about revolution in post-war Czechoslovakia. Although the STR was an influential concept widely researched and discussed across the Eastern Bloc, its Czechoslovak conceptualization was to a certain extent specific and focused on issues closely connected with the reform communist agenda which culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968.² In the following text, the STR theory of revolution is discussed as part of a longer development from the discourse of “national and democratic revolution” in the immediate post-war years and transformations of the theory of revolution under Stalinism and post-Stalinism to Richta’s attempt to renew and rethink the issue of revolution as a part of the reform communist political and social thinking. I will examine how this specific concept of revolution was related to more general political ideas about socialism and its further development towards future communist society. From the perspective of intellectual history, state socialism was a genuine modernist political project and was thus open to ideas aiming to connect the revolutionary perspectives of Marxism with emphasis on science, technology and advanced techniques of social and economic organization. In the specific context of reform communism, when the social sciences seemed to be an important agent in economic and political reforms, it was possible to develop an intellectually influential and politically highly relevant STR project. It offered the vision of socialist post-industrialism emphasizing automation, social individualization and, in general, the far-reaching introduction of expert knowledge into the sphere of governance. However, this concept of revolutionary development towards communist society suffered from serious inner contradictions, most importantly evident technocratic flaws. The idea of post-industrial communist society contained both the vision of educated socialist individuals participating in governance and constantly cultivating themselves by means of science and technology, and technocratic socialism governed by experts and completely organized according to the rules of scientific rationality. After 1968, when reform

¹ Radovan Richta (1924–1983) was a Czech philosopher and sociologist. Richta was involved in the anti-Nazi resistance during the Second World War, was imprisoned by Nazis, and joined the Communist Party after 1945. Richta was active as a journalist in the Communist Party cultural review *Tvorba*, and became a researcher at the Institute for Philosophy of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (CSAS) in 1954. He was among the leading intellectuals of the Czechoslovak de-Stalinization movement, and his intellectual journey was characterized by his development from young Stalinist activist to a reform communist thinker. However, after 1968 Richta renounced his reform communist leanings and became an important official of the Czechoslovak late socialist social sciences, and was employed amongst other positions as the director of the CSAS Institute for Philosophy and Sociology.

² The STR concept of Radovan Richta is further analyzed in Sommer (2015) and Sommer (2016).

communism collapsed and the STR concept was transformed into the prominent developmental theory of the Czechoslovak consolidation regime, these technocratic tendencies became dominant in the STR discourse and the fate of this intellectual project mirrored a much broader development of Czechoslovak state socialism from the revolutionary ambitions of the 1960s to the technocratic authoritarianism of the following two decades.

I will first discuss how revolution was conceptualized within the political discourse of Czechoslovak communism immediately after the Second World War and during the Stalinist era. The following section is concerned with the post-Stalinist controversy about socialist revolution and the socialist state. This lengthy discussion was the most important social scientific debate of the 1950s and had serious implications for the further development of the social sciences and social scientific expertise in Czechoslovakia. The STR project of Radovan Richta and its treatment of the issue of revolution is analyzed in the third part of the article. The controversial path of the STR concept after the collapse of the Prague Spring and its implications for a more general understanding of Richta's intellectual project are also discussed in the last part.

Revolution after 1945: from national and democratic revolution to Stalinism

With the end of Nazi occupation and the liberation of Czechoslovakia in May 1945, the new political system of people's democracy, invented and negotiated by the Czechoslovak political representatives in exile during the war, was fully established. It was based on three closely interwoven principles: broad introduction of socialist measures in the sphere of economic governance, regulation of the polity by the establishment of the National Front coalition, and policy-making and political discourse built largely on nationalism and targeted primarily against Germans and Hungarians. The defeat of Nazi Germany and the establishment of a new political regime were recognized by contemporaries as a “national and democratic revolution”—an epochal watershed in the national history, when a more democratic and just regime of governance was established and, simultaneously, when the bitter conflicts between Czechs and Germans or Slovaks and Hungarians, that had lasted for centuries, were finally resolved (Abrams 2004; Brenner 2009; Frommer 2005). This vision of revolutionary change was promoted by the Czechoslovak political elites and supported by the majority of the population. The dominant idea was that ongoing political, social and economic transformations were the basis of a specific “Czechoslovak road to socialism” (Abrams 2004: 178–198; Brenner 2009: 192–206; Schulze-Wessel 1994). Although the Communist Party was a major political force in the country after 1945, the political system of people's democracy was fully backed by other existing political parties, from social democrats to Christian socialists, by societal organizations, the media, and the vast majority of intellectual elites. It would thus be confusing to portray this political arrangement as a communist invention followed blindly by their “puppets” in other political parties and societal organizations. On the contrary, the post-war people's democracy was

based on a consensus across the political spectrum. However, the dynamic of political development from 1945 to 1948 was driven by the increasing conflict within the National Front coalition caused by the communist effort to gradually seize the apparatuses of the state, army, and security forces. This conflict came to an end in the political crisis of late 1947 and early 1948 that was resolved by the communist takeover in February 1948. This event, later recognized by communist theoreticians as the culmination of “national and democratic revolution”, was a result of both orchestrated activities of communists and their allies and the inability of other political forces to counteract the communist strategy of takeover. The strategy was based on cold-blooded moves in the sphere of high politics supported by the political mobilization of rank and files as well as by the deployment of security forces controlled by communist officials. The idea of “national and democratic revolution” developed within this particular historical context and, as will be discussed below, its conceptualization was significantly influenced by the specific political constellation in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1948.

Although no coherent and authoritative theoretical account of the “national and democratic revolution” was elaborated in the second half of the 1940s, its general contours were sketched by the Communist Party authorities. In a public speech concerned with the “further development of the national revolution”, the communist leader Klement Gottwald claimed that the Czechoslovak revolution was a historical process which had enabled the building of a truly democratic and people’s republic. The idea that all power comes from the people was not an empty catchphrase or formal constitutional arrangement but a social and political reality. This revolution was thus described as a far-reaching transformation of governance. The new institutional framework of people’s democracy was introduced together with radical intervention in the composition of the Czechoslovak population, resulting in the creation of a nationally homogeneous society purged of Germans and Hungarians. Moreover, according to Gottwald, an inseparable part of this revolution was moral regeneration achieved by punishing Czech and Slovak “traitors” who had collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War (Gottwald 1945).

The historically exceptional nature and novelty of the Czechoslovak revolution and its immediate outcomes was emphasized by contemporaries. The prominent communist politician and trade union leader Antonín Zápotocký highlighted this new quality of the 1945 revolution by drawing a comparison with another crucial moment in Czech and Slovak history—the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Zápotocký compared the “national and democratic revolution” to a fast train hurtling toward a future of national unity, social justice, affluence, and collectivism. According to him, any attempt to slow down or stop this train, as previously Czechoslovak capitalist elites had attempted in 1918, had to be overcome by the principal and full application of a revolutionary program of people’s democracy based on a radical break with the “old” and “scant” democracy of the inter-war period (Zápotocký 1945). The revolution was described by leading communist politicians as an the introduction of specific socialist governance in the fields of state administration and the economy and, more generally, as the establishment of

solid national unity by means of the eradication of all hostile social elements such as German Nazis or greedy Czech and Slovak capitalists.

Immediately in the early post-war period, the question was raised whether this specific Czechoslovak revolution was compatible with the Marxist theoretical tradition and whether it was even in accordance with the general historical trajectory of the development from bourgeois society to socialism and communism as sketched out in canonical works of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism. In his book dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, the Communist Party theoretician and leading propagandist Pavel Reiman sought to integrate the most recent Czechoslovak experience of the “national and democratic revolution” into the system of Marxist thought. According to Reiman, the non-violent and peaceful path towards socialism was rooted firmly in the theory of revolution as conceptualized previously by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. Reiman emphasized the role of class relations, which, in the particular Czechoslovak case, enabled the initiation of the socialist transformation in the course of a revolution primarily oriented towards national liberation and creating a state in the form of a people’s democracy. The Czechoslovak road to socialism thus became a specific form of revolution. The socialist policy measures that had been proposed by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* were to be introduced gradually and peacefully, without violence or armed struggle against counterrevolutionary elements in society. This specific revolution seemed to bring together national, democratic, and class emancipation and thus initiate the development towards socialism by new means, yet simultaneously in accordance with official Marxist theory as well as with Czechoslovakia’s national specifics (Reiman 1948).

These attempts to define and simultaneously to defend the concept of a “national and democratic revolution” were interrupted in the late 1940s, by the introduction of the policy of “sharpening the class struggle” within the international communist movement. With regard to the Czechoslovak communists, this meant a significant change of their political strategy and a relatively harsh intervention in the political discourse of the “Czechoslovak road to socialism”. Although “socialist patriotism” was an inseparable part of Stalinist political thinking and traditional motifs of Czech nationalism were constituent parts of the legitimizing narrative of the Stalinist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia, the idea of specific national roads to socialism came to be viewed as an unacceptable ideological deviation.³ From the late 1940s onward, this influential political concept of the early post-war years could be readily labeled as an ideological component of “bourgeois nationalism”. Within the realm of theory, socialist revolution was conceptualized exclusively according to the conventional Leninist paradigm describing the individual stages of the revolutionary process from democratic to socialist revolution and characterizing the events of October 1917 as the archetypal socialist revolution. This Leninist taxonomy, based on the particular Soviet experience, became the obligatory framework for thinking about revolution. However, during the Stalinist era it was hard to find any serious attempt to theorize socialist revolution. Rather than revolutionary theory, revolutionary politics took pride of place. In the early 1950s, talk of socialist revolution

³ See, for example Kusák (1998).

was more a matter of practical policy-making than a subject of intellectual inquiry. Stalinist political literature dealt primarily with direct propagandist support for the ongoing social and economic transformations, whereas theory amounted to no more than the perpetual repetition of the Stalinist catechism inscribed in several canonical texts of Marxism-Leninism.⁴

When the social and political crisis caused by the excesses of Stalinist governance became evident in the mid-1950s, and Khrushchev initiated the first wave of de-Stalinization in 1956, the harsh simplifications of theoretical thinking under Stalinism also came under critical scrutiny. In the production of social knowledge, overcoming Stalinist fallacies was framed within the discourse of “scientization”. This meant the rejection of Stalinist social science characterized as dogmatic, vague, and schematic, and its replacement by a regime of knowledge production aiming to reconcile Marxist–Leninist partisanship with scientific rigor.⁵

Out of the iron cage of Leninism: post-Stalinism and “socialist revolution” controversy

It was significant for the “scientization” tendencies of the post-Stalinist era that social scientists intended to systematize Marxist–Leninist political and social thought as a specific discipline of “scientific communism”. One of the substantial components of this new field was the study of the “theory, strategy, and tactics of socialist revolution”. This was characterized as research into the “general laws of social development“, which were closely connected with the “revolutionary transformation” of capitalist into socialist society. The aim of this scholarship was also to draw “tactical conclusions” from theorizing about the socialist revolution and to produce policy-relevant knowledge relevant to socialist construction (Kučera and Kaláb 1959: 10). The purpose consisted in tying the Marxist–Leninist theory of socialist revolution to more practical considerations with respect to the policy-making of the Communist Party.

However, the project did not result in the establishment of an authoritative and universally accepted theory. In fact, quite the opposite was true. In the second half of the 1950s the issue of socialist revolution became the source of a long-lasting and heated controversy among political scientists, legal pundits, and scholars of “scientific communism”. There were two central problems around which the entire debate was structured. Firstly, several parties in this controversy raised the politically sensitive issue of Marxist–Leninist theory’s universality. The idea of national roads to socialism was mirrored in questioning the assumption that theoretical frameworks, elaborated on the basis of the Soviet experience, were wholly and obligatorily applicable to the theorizing about the specific Czechoslovak revolution. Was such mechanical treatment of the theory of socialist revolution really useful in the endeavor to understand developments in the country after 1945 in all their complexity? This question became a source of disagreement among

⁴ For the Stalinist social sciences and humanities, see Barber (1981) and Kojevnikov (2000).

⁵ For the general concept of “scientization”, see Brückweh et al. (2012) and Wagner (2008). For the case study of Czechoslovak historiography in the 1950s and 1960s, see Sommer (2011).

scholars and stood at the heart of the debate concerning the socialist revolution and related attempts to develop original concepts of the socialist revolution on the basis of the historical experience of East and Central European nations after 1945 (Houška 1960; Foustka 1958; Kučera 1962).⁶ Although it resulted in the publication of complicated taxonomies of revolutions and their individual stages, this sometimes scholastic exercise in Marxist–Leninist theory indicated that the innovation and modification of a seemingly law-like and unchangeable theory was possible. Moreover, it led to the first attempts to explain the latest historical developments in Czechoslovakia and the surrounding region (Kozák 1956, 1957). Some of the parties in this controversy were also eager to construct more general historical narratives of the early post-war history.⁷

The second important topic of the debate concerned the institutional arrangement of the socialist state. Apart from seeking to characterize and classify the individual stages, types and sub-types of revolution, scholars intended to characterize the institutional structures and power-relations produced by revolutionary processes. Seen from this perspective, the socialist state and people’s democracy system of governance became the subjects of detailed examination by political scientists and legal scholars (Houška and Kára 1955; Bystřina 1957; Lakatoš 1957). Their goal was to characterize the state socialist state-form and governmental arrangement and simultaneously to develop a theoretical framework which could be used in research into the socialist state and its legal framework. Although this inquiry into the theory of the socialist state was influenced by the ongoing controversy surrounding the subject of socialist revolution, it led to certain widely shared and almost universally accepted conclusions. Significantly, the idea that the socialist state is the most important outcome of the socialist revolution became crucial for the further theorizing as well as policy-making. The issues of socialist revolution and socialist governance were thus analyzed strictly as outcomes of the change in power-relations and state-form from the bourgeois state to people’s democracy or, respectively, from the elimination of the old class-structure to the establishment of the socialist state apparatus and related institutions.

As a consequence, such theorizing about revolution remained locked within the iron cage of Leninism (Kučera 1962). Proposals to innovate or even reformulate the theory of socialist revolution led to the integration of the Czechoslovak experience, with its “peaceful” and gradual transition to socialism, into complicated schemes portraying the individual stages of revolutionary processes. Such theorizing, although highly important, contentious, and surrounded by long-lasting controversy, remained in accord with the traditional examination of revolutionary strategy and tactics that had been so popular in communist political theory since the Comintern era. It required substantially different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives in order to contemplate revolution in a new and non-dogmatic way. These impulses included the revival of sociology, the emergence of Marxist revisionism, and so-called “Marxist

⁶ The whole controversy was initiated by Houška and Kára (1954).

⁷ The most important were conference papers published in Klimeš et al. (1955). See also Klimeš and Zacheval (1958).

humanism” in philosophical thought, and, more generally, the establishment of the reform communist social sciences in the first half of the 1960s.⁸

Rethinking the revolution in the 1960s: the “scientific and technological revolution” between emancipation and technocratic socialism

The vast majority of the parties in the socialist revolution controversy dealt with issues somehow connected to the transition from capitalism to socialism and to the institutional arrangement of socialist governance. Although it differed fundamentally from the Stalinist theoretical discourse, which excluded any exchange of opinion or at least hints of meaningful debate, it remained a relatively ossified style of thinking. The reformist *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s, rooted in the firm conviction that without fundamental intellectual as well as policy interventions the legacy of Stalinism would not be overcome, required radically different social thought. Instead of more or less schematic descriptions of the socialist state and the individual stages of revolutionary processes, the reform communist social and political thought subscribed to the languages of sociology and philosophy. With a vision of far-reaching reform of socialism in sight, the issue of revolution once again became highly topical during the 1960s. However, this time it was contemplated more as a phenomenon of the future than as a legacy of the glorious revolutionary past.

The political and social thought of Czechoslovak reform communism mobilized various intellectual traditions and sources, and was certainly not monolithic. Nevertheless, if a basic and common intellectual precondition of reform communist thought did obtain, it concerned the conviction that revolution or at least fundamental social change was an ongoing process. Whether it was theorizing about industrial society and technological change or philosophical deliberations about human existence and alienation of modern subjects, the majority of reform-oriented intellectuals shared the hope for change, development or progress towards a qualitatively higher stage of socialism. Reform communist social and political thought advanced the idea that it is both possible and desirable to consciously construct new institutions and techniques of governance, or even create advanced forms of human existence. Czechoslovak reform communism was thus constructed as a genuine revolutionary project requiring as such its own theory of revolution. At the center of STR stood the concept of the close relationship among scientific progress, technological development, and social change, being the most thoroughly elaborated theoretical account of social change produced by Czechoslovak reformist thinkers in the 1960s.

It was widely held that the building and governing of socialism consisted in a planned and coordinated activity of individuals as well as various governmental bodies in order to consciously create, reshape or modify social reality. Not specifically reformist, this conviction rather mirrored a general belief that the planning and sophisticated administration of social and economic life under socialism are the means

⁸ The conceptualization of revolution by Czech “Marxist humanism” is analyzed in Jan Mervart’s article in this issue. After 1968, when the reform communist social sciences were denounced and purged as an example of counterrevolutionary social knowledge, a return to 1950s-style revolution theory could be observed. As examples of such writing, see Houška (1974) or Kučera (1980).

by which the famous leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom would take place. In 1964, the Marxist–Leninist theoretician Jiří Mužík characterized the capacity of the socialist state to consciously change social and economic conditions as an example of “scientific governance”, described by him as a “special case of conscious social conduct”. According to Mužík, this qualitatively higher level of the relationship between subject and object under socialism derived from “scientific governance”. The ability to govern scientifically distinguished conscious human conduct from uncoordinated and haphazard “spontaneity” (Mužík 1964: 8–9).

However, such theorizing did not overcome the limits of thinking based on the centrality of the socialist state and its apparatus of governance for the further conceptualization of social change under socialism. It required a different approach to the issue of the revolutionary subject, that is, more generally, to go beyond the traditional characteristic of socialist revolution as a seizure of state-power by the revolutionary party and subsequent establishment of the socialist state. Rethinking the post-Stalinist concepts of revolution went hand in hand with the growing interest of social scientists and policy-makers in scientific and technological change. Whereas the institutional structures of the socialist state had been established during the 1950s and codified by the new socialist constitution adopted in 1960, and thus regarded as already existing and more or less consolidated realms of governance, the future development from socialism towards communism came to be seen increasingly as a matter of scientific progress and technological innovation. According to the “New Course” policy introduced in the Soviet Union by Nikita Khrushchev, the future of socialism depended primarily on the growth of scientific knowledge and the introduction of the most advanced technologies. Of the utmost importance were economic success, higher living standards, and mass consumption.⁹ The proclaimed shift towards more sophisticated techniques of governance and highlighting different and to a certain extent more subtle goals of the future social transformations required a specific theoretical underpinning different from the analytically narrow-minded and ideologically simplified Stalinist theories. Within this context, STR theory became a new framework for further conceptualization of the socialist future, an analytical tool with which to define the specific content of socialist policy-making in the post-Stalinist era.

Although an influential framework of social and political thought in the Eastern Bloc, the STR concept lacked homogeneity as a theory or even as a precisely defined collection of theoretical arguments.¹⁰ It acquired the form of a discourse about the further development of socialism, and was conceptualized differently by different authors. It served as a master narrative of the socialist future in programmatic documents and official proclamations, as well as in popular narratives concerning the future of socialism. The STR also provided a theoretical explanation of endeavors to introduce scientific knowledge and advanced methods of organization and management into socialist governance. The rise of cybernetics

⁹ For the transformation of state socialist modernity after 1956, see Engerman (2004) and Krylova (2014).

¹⁰ For the development of the STR research in the USSR, see Buchholz (1975), Buchholz and Blakeley (1979), Cooper (1977), Hoffmann (1978), Hoffmann (1979) and Guth (2015).

and the attempts to develop organizational science and system analysis were likewise fell within the scope of STR discourse.¹¹

In the case of Czechoslovakia, the STR took form within a specific social theory and field of research tying the examination of labor in post-industrialism with future-oriented research into the links between social change and the far-reaching introduction of science into various fields of production and everyday life. The most important Czechoslovak STR thinker was the sociologist and philosopher Radovan Richta, who drew his primary inspiration from Karl Marx's analysis of the relationship between science and "productive forces" in *Gundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* as well as from James D. Bernal's theory of science. Richta authored a complex conceptual framework for the STR that included a variety of topics, from automation and related changes in the "productive forces" to the creation of an "artificial environment" and the introduction of more participatory governance in socialism. A substantial part of his STR concept involved as well a specific theory of revolution. He sought to go beyond the traditional Marxist-Leninist conceptualization and to develop a theory of revolution which would be useful in the decades following the communist takeover and the initial phase of socialist state-building. With some degree of hyperbole, it can be described as the revival of the idea of revolution in post-Stalinist and post-revolutionary conditions.¹²

A philosopher who claimed allegiance to the Marxist intellectual tradition, Richta's concern involved rethinking the Marxist theory of social change for the coming age of "advanced socialism" and post-industrialism. In 1963 Richta published two crucial works introducing all the fundamental arguments of his STR concept (Richta 1963a, b). His objective consisted in formulating a theory of revolution going beyond the narrow Marxist-Leninist concept of revolution and accepting the recent level of socialist construction embodied in the existence of the socialist state, the centrally planned economy, and specific socialist cultural values. Although the reality of socialism was portrayed by Richta as a significant outcome of the first decade of socialist construction, he simultaneously described it as a mere basis for future far-reaching social, political, and cultural transformations. For Richta, the establishment of socialism during the 1950s constituted merely the first stage of the fundamental socialist transformations. Moreover, this initial phase of the revolution suffered serious flaws as a result of all the mistakes and setbacks the Stalinist style of governance caused. What in the late 1950s had been described by legal experts and political scientist as the greatest achievement of the socialist revolution was seen by Richta rather as embryonic socialism, rife with imperfections and difficulties in policy-making and economic life (Richta 1963a: 39–41). This analysis contained an explicit critique of Stalinism and was thus in a perfect accordance with the emerging reform communist political discourse. However, it also questioned some basic assumptions of the officially sanctioned theory of

¹¹ For the history of Soviet cybernetics, see Gerovitsch (2002). The history of system-analysis in the USSR is analyzed in Rindzeviciute (2016).

¹² The early history of Marxist revisionism in Central Europe is analyzed in Kopeček (2009).

revolution. From Richta’s perspective, the socialist revolution was far from complete and thus remained open to further theorizing.

STR theory found new impulses for the future development of socialism in science and technology. At the same time, Richta sharply criticized the technoskepticism and underestimation of science by the Stalinist authorities (Richta 1963a: 3–17). He analyzed science and technology as crucial agents of development towards communism. He emphasized that the epochal transition from industrial to “scientific civilization” required not only significant support of science by policy-makers and further investment in the scientific infrastructure, but first of all a fundamental rethinking and subsequent reconfiguration of the role of “productive forces” in the process of social change. Richta predicted the development from industrial to post-industrial production and from manual labor to automation as a starting point for the fundamental social change under socialism.

Such change within the structure of “productive forces”, further emphasized by characterizing science as a “direct productive force”, required a new organization of labor, governance, education as well as consumption and leisure. The structure of production based on non-manual and intellectual labor, for example on research or the organization and management of fully automated production, acquired the status of a pillar of the future socialist society. This vision of post-industrial socialism placed emphasis on social participation in decision-making as well as on permanent self-cultivation of individuals. Discussion of STR concerned not only its role in bringing about a change of the entire structure of productive forces but also in being the starting point for the construction of new human subjects in the socialist post-industrial society. Richta characterized these social processes as the “social development of man”, “the conscious making of life” and “the real development of human beings” (Richta 1963b: 50–51). He portrayed socialist post-industrialism as a specific regime of governance in which every individual has an opportunity to utilize “powers of scientific knowledge” and shape his or her own existence based on a real “human sense” of life (Richta 1963b: 50–51).

The scientific and technological revolution seemed to be a historical process enabling the establishment of an entirely new political economy of socialism based on the large-scale introduction of science and technology into all realms of production, governance, and everyday life. For Richta it provided an impetus for truly revolutionary changes affecting all aspects of social organization and human existence. In STR theory, the word “revolution” was not a rhetorical device or an obligatory reference to Marxist–Leninist political language. This concept designated a blueprint for the further stages of the socialist revolution, going beyond the simple seizure of state institutions and nationalization of the economy. Richta conceived the STR as a complex revolutionary process, the first revolution in human history which intervened in “all spheres of human life, human activity, and human relationships” (Richta 1963a: 79). It had nothing to do with an uprising, a violent mobilization of the masses against the last remnants of the bourgeois order or a power-struggle aiming to revolutionize society once again in order to overthrow the ruling elites and replace them with new power-holders. This revolution took place in research institutes, laboratories, and classrooms occurring as a long-term process structured around science and technology, culture, and the “cultivation of

relationships among people”. In order to characterize the new revolutionary subject of the STR, Richta wrote: “*In this stage of the communist revolution, the thousands of pioneers manifest their heroism by their fierce, daily and fearless ascent to the peaks of science, technology and culture. This kind of heroism is no less heroic than the bravery of fighters in the revolutionary armies in the class struggles of the past. On the contrary, the contemporary heroes follow them and in some sense even overcome them—because their struggle requires rather silent, hidden and discreet victories over their own passivity and personal limits.*” (Richta 1963a: 80). The book *Man and Technology in the Revolution of Our Age* concluded with an urgent appeal formulated as a question: “*Are we still behaving as revolutionaries?*” asked Richta (Richta 1963a: 80). In fact, it was a call for a massive resurrection of the revolutionary ethos which, according to Richta and his reform communist contemporaries, had gone missing during the course of the 1950s and been replaced by the bureaucratic rule of the Communist Party apparatus. Although Richta’s critique of the existing form of socialism was sophisticated, certainly not radically revisionist, and written in the officially sanctioned language of Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization policy, he undoubtedly wished to formulate a perspective on revolutionary change under the non-revolutionary conditions of post-Stalinism. When state-building and the violent transformation of the class structure lost their importance and urgency, science and technological innovations then appeared as almost unlimited sources of knowledge and competencies, enabling progress towards the future communist society.

The STR concept elaborated by Richta played an important role in the boom of critical Marxist thought in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s. What in the previous decade had usually been labeled as ideologically unacceptable revisionism gained academic as well as political significance, and in certain cases also international recognition during the 1960s. The books authored by Karel Kosík, Robert Kalivoda, Ivan Sviták, Radovan Richta, and Vítězslav Gardavský served as striking examples of the non-conformist and non-dogmatic Marxist thinking developed in one of the Eastern Bloc countries (Cf., for example Kosík 1976, 1995; Gardavský 1968). These reform communist thinkers became influential as scholars and also gained a reputation as public intellectuals and political figures. Such a significant presence of reform-oriented and critical-minded philosophers and social scientists in public debates and policy-relevant expert activities became one of the most important intellectual phenomena of the Czechoslovak “Sixties” (Hruby 1980; Kusin 1971; Skilling 1976; Sommer 2011; Voříšek 2012).

However, Richta’s case was to a certain extent specific and out of the ordinary. While Kosík and other philosophers engaged in various public debates rather as individual intellectuals, the STR project caught the attention of the reform communist policy-makers.¹³ Richta was thus appointed as a head of his own research team dealing with the “social and human implications of the scientific and technological revolution” in order to elaborate a reform guideline for the purposes

¹³ See the most important policy document of Czechoslovak 1968, so-called *The Action Program of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia* in Remington (1969: 88–137), which was co-authored by Richta.

of the Communist Party leadership.¹⁴ This caused a fundamental change in the organization of the STR research and, simultaneously, it further reinforced Richta's prominent position in the reform communist academia. The most important product of “Richta's team” is the book *Civilization at the Crossroads* (1966) in which theorizing about social change towards socialist post-industrialism is supplemented by empirical case studies authored by scholars from different fields of expertise, such as social psychology or urban planning.¹⁵ *Civilization* reflected numerous highly topical discussions about modernity, post-industrial society, de-Stalinization, the social role of science and technology, and “Marxist humanism”. Simultaneously, the Communist Party authorities as well as the Czechoslovak public recognized the STR concept as expertise of extraordinary political importance and as a long-term blueprint for fundamental political reform.

This specific institutional and intellectual position of the STR project was mirrored in its concept of revolution. *Civilization* implemented the theoretical framework that Richta had already been introduced in his two books on the STR published in 1963. However, Richta took advantage of available empirical studies and composed the book as a collection of theoretical reflections, policy recommendations, analyses of particular social, economic and political issues, and predictions of future development in various social and political domains. Rather than a departure from Richta's earlier texts, *Civilization* synthesized his theory, supported by empirical data and supplemented by policy recommendations for the Communist Party authorities. Although it was based on the conviction that social change was a matter of scientific rationality and expert governance, the book conceptualized the STR as a revolutionary project. In Richta's view, the aim of building a post-industrial communist society and creating a new man freed from all the burdens of a declining industrial age and capable of permanent self-cultivation could only be possible with careful planning of social, economic and political development by a huge apparatus of scientists and experts. Richta characterized what seemed to be rather a technical issue as a truly revolutionary process bringing about fundamental social and political transformations.

This reformulation of revolutionary theory by tying it to the agenda of science and technology represented one of the most prominent attempts to rehabilitate and revive the notion of revolution after the failures of Stalinism. Regarding its influence and predominantly enthusiastic reception, the STR concept achieved reasonable success in the endeavor to bring back the revolutionary ethos to political and social thought in the post-Stalinist period. Although the STR gained broad public attention and was praised as an important theoretical innovation and a politically highly topical program of the reform communist agenda of social change, it contained several contradictory implications for the future transformations of the communist political project. If this theory of revolution seemed to be intellectually sophisticated and conceptually coherent, it posed serious questions with regard to its possible outcomes.

¹⁴ For the institutional history of this research collective, see Hoppe (2015).

¹⁵ Richta (1969). For the first Czech edition, see Richta (1966).

The STR concept characterized scientists and experts as new revolutionary subjects and bearers of all significant social and political changes. Indeed, it amounted to a critical reflection on Stalinist workerism in the search for a revolutionary appeal that would be attractive to the Czechoslovak intelligentsia. However, such a serious intervention into the communist thinking about revolution opened up the issue of class relations in the officially classless society. Richta predicted the transformation of the “productive forces” during the course of the transition towards post-industrialism. Besides other matters, this meant the replacement of manual workers by an educated workforce concerned with the management and organization of fully automated production or services. Richta acknowledged that this would be a long-term process rather than a rapid shift towards a fundamentally different regime of production. Nevertheless, this transition towards post-industrial socialism involved the guidance of experts and scientists. By implication, workers, still officially praised as the vanguard of the revolution and a pillar of socialist society, devolved in fact to a social stratum facing its inevitable decline. Despite Richta’s emphasis on socialism as capable of managing this change in the social hierarchy smoothly and not to the detriment of manual workers, the STR theory implied the necessity of expert governance or at least expert guidance in the transition towards socialist post-industrialism. It was thus possible to understand the STR as a theory of expert or even technocratic governance under socialism.

From this point of view, the STR ascribed the status of revolutionary subject to the educated intelligentsia, demanding a leading position in the hierarchy of the state socialist power-relations. Although Richta did propose the radical transformation of state socialist polity by the introduction of much broader public participation in the decision-making process, the STR concept involved as well expert governance and the primacy of scientific rationality in the organization of society. This tension between the call for further social emancipation and technocratic ideas of thoroughly organized and carefully planned development under the guidance of scientists and experts resonated within the STR concept of revolution. It remained unclear if such a revolutionary process would lead to a communist society composed of highly educated and self-confident individuals endeavoring towards perpetual self-cultivation or to a dystopia governed by experts and technocrats according to the strict rules of scientific rationality. This serious contradiction in the STR concept mirrored some basic dilemmas not only of the reform communist experiment but also of high modernity as such.¹⁶

As certain analysts of state socialism, from the 1960s onward, observed, socialist countries underwent a silent revolution resulting in the establishment of an influential social stratum composed of technocrats and experts. In the early 1970s Daniel Bell raised this point in his analysis of the STR theory, described later as well by “sovietologists” and dissenting social scientists with first-hand experience of the social transformations in the Eastern Bloc (Bell 1973; Konrád and Szelényi 1979; Haraszti 1977; Hoffmann and Laird 1985; Lampland 1995). According to these critical insights into the social reality of late socialism, the new class of engineers, managers and other experts was becoming increasingly influential and

¹⁶ For the contradictions in the project of modernity, see Wagner (1994) and Scott (1998).

was eager to occupy a dominant position in society. It seemed that the next phase of socialist revolution, predicted by Richta in the 1960s, would proceed in a significantly different direction. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the establishment of a more authoritarian regime after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion confirmed the fears of the technocratic pitfalls in the STR vision of the socialist future. Moreover, Richta's pragmatic shift from the promotion of the reform communist agenda to the support of the “consolidation” governance in the aftermath of the Prague Spring only served to emphasize the point.¹⁷ After 1968 Richta remained active in the institutional transformation of the social sciences, even as an extensive purge of reform communist scholars took place. He reformulated the STR concept in accordance with the altered political conditions following the suppression of reform communism.¹⁸ After the early 1970s, the STR, which in the previous decade had been formulated as a critical and reform-oriented social theory of socialist post-industrialism, became a rosy and unproblematic narrative of the development towards communism. It served primarily as a source of legitimization for the late socialist regime based on strict ideological control and careful top-down administration of so-called mature socialism.

These developments thus represented an immense failure of Richta's original STR theory. Instead of the predicted post-industrial revolution bringing about a more humane socialist society through the use of science and technology, the reality of late socialism resembled rather the outcome of an authoritarian counter-revolution of technocrats, apparatchiks, and the anti-reformist wing in the Communist Party leadership. After 1968, the STR collapsed also intellectually as a result of its reformulation by Richta and his collaborators.¹⁹ If the reform communist STR had been an intellectually exciting concept of the relationship between science and “productive forces”, the late socialist incarnation of the STR resembled a mere schematic blueprint for how to scientifically govern the already existing technocratic socialism.

Conclusion

The vision of “scientific civilization” highlighted the Enlightenment-style firm belief in the social and political importance of science. From this point of view, scientific and technological progress constituted the subject of social change and thus bore a specific civilizational mission. Within the context of state socialism, the aim had been to build a new governmental rationality on the basis of sophisticated planning, scientific management and detailed organization of social development. This revolutionary process had to be implemented by various governmental

¹⁷ Šimečka (1984). For a case study covering “consolidation” and “normalization” in the university milieu, see Jareš et al. (2012)

¹⁸ The functioning of science in Czechoslovakia after 1968 is described in Oates-Indruchová (2008).

¹⁹ The most important account of the late socialist STR was the book *Man-Science-Technology* (1973) authored by the collective of Czechoslovak and Soviet scholars. See Collective of authors (1973). See also Richta and Filipce (1972).

technologies developed primarily by scientists and engineers. Although ideas of democratization and pluralization of socialism were also discussed, the “Janus face” of Richta’s thinking about social transformation consisted precisely in this tension between the humanistic project of “scientific civilization” and a technocratic vision of the well-organized and rationally planned governance of the socialist state.

This conceptualization of revolution was structured around two crucial and interconnected elements: (1) the humanistic and emancipatory vision of a new socialist man fully and consciously participating in the building of a “scientific civilization” and (2) scientific rationality and technological progress characterized as the principal initiators of social change. Thanks to its close cooperation with the political elites and the political significance of the STR concept, Richta’s project became a long-term governmental strategy and specific field of expertise rather than a radical intellectual project of the distant communist future. Following the collapse of reform communism STR underwent transformation to become the official developmental theory of the late socialist dictatorship. After the elimination of certain important elements of the reform communist STR, for example the critique of Stalinism and calls for broader social participation in the decision-making processes, this revolutionary theory was transformed into a program of technocratic governance. As a consequence, the STR concept lost its revolutionary ethos and served merely as a blueprint for a careful cultivation of the existing socialism, without any substantial vision of fundamental social and political changes. After 1968, revolution was discussed much as it had been in the late 1950s—as a historical phenomenon and important component of an ossified Marxist–Leninist theoretical canon. The fate of the STR in the 1970s and 1980s thus mirrored the more general development of official Marxist thought in the state socialist countries towards intellectual decline and political insignificance.

Acknowledgements This article was researched and written with the support of the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR) as a part of the Project GJ15-19437Y entitled “The Road to Technocratic Socialism: Concepts of Governance in Czechoslovakia (1953–1975)”.

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