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Social protests and the world of environmentalists in the Czech Republic

Nicolas Maslowski

Thirty years ago, there were no environmentalists' social groups in Czech lands (Czechoslovakia). Just a few isolated persons influenced by the American movements of underground, hippies, environmentalists and pacifists were trying to introduce those arguments and values, without any visible success

Nowadays, there are activists, organisations and activities related to the defence of environment. This confirms that a social group of environmentalists does exist. But there are even many more facts proving this emergence.

What is a social group?

In a naïve way we can say that this social group was created by people sharing, to some extent, common "values" and points of view. We use the French pragmatic sociological model to define this social link. Pragmatic sociology considers that people can act similarly or have a common background without always being conscious of that. These people have integrated dispositions, and they are able to use them in practice, without even thinking about them. This is the result of "socialisation" to a core of discourses, references, practices (Bourdieu 1972).

This social group consists of people who are more or less socialised to that core. This core of texts, people, references, legitimacies is both a way to justify a position or a point of view and an instrument to analyse and understand the reality. Luc Boltanski, in his critical sociology, calls this structure, this core, a social world (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). One can participate in

the environmentalists' world but also participate in many other social worlds.

Behind its apparent stability, the structure of a social world is a question of frequent reinterpretations. The world of environmentalists defines itself who is important and who is not, who is high and who is low, what are the necessary qualities to have so that one can grow in the eyes of this social group. The structure of the social world is given by inheritance as well as by people's actions. Some people, due to their actions in the past, may have special "positions", or estates, in the environmentalists' world.

Thus the structure of environmentalists' world is constituted by institutions such as: famous people who are an institution by themselves, some organisations and others institutions like academic experts and their departments.

According to Boltanski's theory, there is a top in a social world. In this respect the situation is quite complicated among the environmentalists: some people try to get the legitimacy to speak in the name of the environmentalists. But due to its strong variability, there are several persons and institutions that may have this legitimacy. Since the last elections (2006), the Green Party is one of the main candidates for this position. In a very high position and less controversial than the Green Party, are some NGO's.

The institutions of the environmentalists social world are Social Movement Organisations – SMOs - , (*sensu* McCarthy and Zald 1996), the intellectual newspapers (among them *Literární noviny*), the Green Party, NGOs like Greenpeace, Nesehnutí (Independent social ecological movement), Děti země (Children of the Earth), Ekologický právní servis (Environment law service).

When we study such organisations, we can see that social protests are very important to them. In the repertoire of

actions that those social movement organisations propose to the activists, social protests are often considered as an important way to influence the “public opinion”, and the policy makers. The scientific expertise remains a marginal, even though growing, activity. The efficiency of protests is a reason for activists to stay in an organisation.

It is relevant to analyse the environmentalists social actors through the notion of environmentalists’ world because we can observe that activists feeling as environmentalists often move from one organisation to another. We can thus use the notion of *career* for analysing the environmental activists. Activists can become more and more important thanks to their personal history and to their trajectory in the environmentalists’ world. Belonging to an organisation or another influences their perceptions and points of view.

Why to analyse environmentalists in the Czech lands? It seems that country scale could not be relevant for a social movement dealing with issues that are often considered as global issues (climate change, energy policies, biodiversity...). One could assume that the environmental movement is international and not specific to a proper nation. Some environmental organisations could be considered as international (Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth) and as using similar discourses and rationales.

First of all, the author of this chapter is not competent to speak about the whole world. Moreover, if we look at the Czech case study, through the results of a qualitative field research on protest and civil society in that country, we can consider that the environmentalist social group appeared and has evolved as a result of the interaction of three factors. The first one is the emergence and structuring of an international social world, the world of the environmentalists, with its related discourses, values, hierarchy, and techniques. The second one is more country-dependent; it is the adaptation of that discourse

to a particular debate, depending on the political local scene. This adaptation needs and produce a local environmental discourse. The last factor is the interaction between an environmental discourse and already existing discourses.

The unity of language, networks and political structure makes the nation a relevant scale of the framing of the movement and for its analyse. But in that national structure, some elements of globalised discourses are playing an important role.

The genesis of the environmentalist world

The threats to the environment linked to major issues like nuclear energy, Genetically Modified Organisms, pollution are considered as a major cause to stand up for in the world of the environmentalists.

But this cause is defended in the environmentalists' world along with other causes: human rights, democracy, freedom of expression and protest, support to the civil society. This mix between strict environmental issues and other social issues is quite similar to what happens in other national versions of environmentalist' worlds.

Similarly to other European environmentalist' worlds, the Czech one pays high attention to the antifascist and antiracists movements. Discourse coalitions and common activities with the anarchists are quite common. It has to be observed that the Czech green activists are, as the Czech anarchists, often more anti-communist than such groups in Western Europe. During demonstrations, in

their slogans, they compare communism and fascism: "komunismus fašismus, stejný hovno stejný hnus¹".

Another specificity is the discursive coalition with the world of the former dissidents. This explains why there is a particular sensitivity to the cause of the Cuban dissidents or why the rejection of Russian imperialism is so strong. As an example, we can point out actions of Nesehnuti against the Russian consulate in Brno in solidarity with Chechnya. To simplify and to refer to the Czech political sphere, one could say that the world of the environmentalists, had it to choose between Havel and Klaus, would vote for Havel. In order to better understand the specificity of the Czech world of environmentalists, it is useful to study the circumstances of its emergence.

The emergence of the world of the environmentalists

During communism, the regime was trying to fight with each social world that they could not control. The Czech dissidents, with the Charter 77, began to try to join the world they wanted to constitute, with the world of the underground. They were organizing training sessions for the young "andoši". The popularisation of the western illegal music was strengthened by the increasing number of double tape recorders. The socialisation to the dissident ideas by the music became a major one: Samizdat, political tapes, private concerts. But, even though we could find environmentalists among the Charter 77, they were marginal.

It would be artificial to separate the world of the environmentalists from the pacifist movement in its

¹ "Communism and fascim are similarly disgusting, are the same shit"

beginning. Like in many countries, at the top of the ecological and environmentalist world, John Lennon was the dominant figure. Even though the Soviet Union was financially and ideologically supporting the environmentalist-pacifist-hippy movement in Western Europe, the core of the environmental arguments paradoxically became the main source for criticism of the communist regimes among citizens of the Eastern bloc.

The *Beatles* phenomenon was one of the more efficient techniques to socialise to a new core of discourses, allowing the criticism of the regime. The world of the environmentalists became an integral part of the world of the underground. This explains why politicians from the right and left sides are even nowadays close to the environmental issue. This could also explain the support from people like V. Havel to environmental organisations and to the Green Party.

On every anniversary of John Lennon's death, the 8/12/1980, activists were meeting in front of the Lennon Wall in Prague. People were signing or drawing on the wall. Those happenings transformed into demonstrations against SS-20 and against the red army occupation. In the mid 80's, around 1000 participants could meet at the John Lennon's wall, which was a very important number of persons if compare to other dissident or protest movements in the former Czechoslovakia. From the meetings a small group of organisers emerged, creating the "young artists for peace" organisation in 1986, and collecting 600 signatures in its beginnings. In 1988, the John Lennon Pacific Club (Mírový klub Johna Lennona) was created, and was supporting the other jailed members of the underground.

In 1988, the pacifist independent initiative for the demilitarisation of the society (NMS-IDS - Nezávislé mírové sdružení - Iniciativa za demilitarizaci společnosti) was created to fight for the suppression of the military

service. This organisation was keeping close relations with WiP (Wolności Pokój) in Poland, CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) in the UK, and the Greens in Germany. The group's spokespersons were H. Marvanová and J. Diensbier. Later Marvanová became a right wing liberal Czech politician; J. Diensbier is nowadays a social democrat. Writer Petr Placák, a dissident and a son of dissident, was trying to combine ecology, humor, monarchy and some kind of anarchy. He created the party "Czech Children", gathered people like Magor, the spiritual father of the Czech underground, and J. Topol, young writer from the underground-intellectual sphere, and was organizing demonstrations such as the one in Stromovka park (in Prague), shouting "let the trees live". In 1989, the environmental cause was supported by various newly emerging associations: the Czech Mothers and the Radical Party (Czech section of the Italian party represented by the porn star Ciciolina, funded with Magor and the dissident Cibulka). A more serious initiative, probably, was the group created around Ivan Dejmal who had a personal and ideological link with the top of the dissent.

The role of university departments and experts on environment, sometimes more isolated, was another important base for the constitution of that social world. But it would be a matter for a research by itself and we will not develop that point here.

The evolution of the world of the environmentalists: the limits of the genetic explanation

All those organisations were participating in the Velvet Revolution, in 1989. Dissident environmentalists went into different non environmentalist parties: Bursík and Dejmal to Christian Democrats (KDU and KDS), Kužvart to Social Democrats. Young Patočka decided to create an

intellectual base for the environmentalist movement in his journal *Literární noviny*. The majority of the environmentalist leaders were rather economically liberal at that time, pro European, and anti-nationalist (Pečinka, 2002)

At the bottom of the world of the environmentalists, the activists are participating in different organisations. They are demonstrating but also looking for grants. The younger generation is participating in the activities of international environmentalist organisations like Greenpeace, and are socialised to the international environmentalist discourses. Some other environmentalists and activists are feeling environmentalists, and are perceived as such and are sharing the hippy pacifist subculture but they are participating in humanitarian or human-rights oriented organisations. They are rather socialised to other types of discourses. V. Havel and his friends are on the top of this social world. All of them are in favour of the European Union, of a subsidiary system and support pro-civil society discourses. The activists involved in this world participate in social protests that do not deal directly with environment but with other issues like human-rights, democracy, and solidarity.

In 2001, the Brandys Forum was organised by centrist parties. They finally decided to collaborate against the “pragmatic politicians” like Zeman and Klaus and to cooperate with representatives of the “real civil society”. Those were Jakub Patočka, left wing environmentalist, Martin Prokop, from the conservative ecological movement Duha, Petr Pospichal from the Helsinki comity for human rights, Alena Müllerová from the Demonstrations for an politically independant Czech TV.

In 2002, environmentalist SMOs had a strategy to take over the power in the small and marginal Green Party (see M. Perottino’s chapter in this book). Symbolically, the

party clearly decided to position itself close to the world of the post-dissent, the humanitarian world and the world of civil society.

Conclusion

The environmentalist's participation in politics leads them to make a choice and to decide whether they are left-wing, right-wing or centrist. The activists coming from environmentalist organisations often already have a leftist identity. The activists from human-rights organisations or from humanitarian ones have mainly a centrist or center-right position. The career of the activists brings them to a strongly different identity.

The main question is now whether we will have a fusion or a confusion of these two major sets of discourses. The social protests and the participation in different SMOs lead to a different type of socialisation. The top of the environmental world is not given genetically, but it is the result of a never ending interaction between participants of that world.

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