

## 13 | PAVEL KOLÁŘ, HROCH'S CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

Hroch has been critical of the concept of 'nationalism'. One aspect is linguistic and shows Hroch working in different national traditions, switching between languages, and mediating between East-Central European, German, and Anglo-American academic cultures. In the early 1990s, as a student in Hroch's 'proseminar', I recall him starting by examining 'concepts', 'definitions' and 'meanings'.

As regards the concept of nationalism, Hroch stressed that in the Anglo-American tradition this was orientated towards statehood, an element weaker, if not absent, in German discourse. In most East-Central European languages "nationalism" is an overtly negative borrowing unrelated to domestic, principally cultural concepts of nation (*narod*, *naród*, *narod* etc.). Such differences can cause misunderstanding about Hroch's Phase A, when scholars pursued apolitical goals. Calling these activities 'nationalist' would impose a political meaning. How apolitical such national movements actually were is another matter. They are for Hroch who treats politics as a distinct zone of struggle for power.

Another aspect is conceptual, not linguistic, and more complex. While one can register different meanings in different languages, the concept is an essentially contested one. (Gallie, 1964) Hroch observes that many Western scholars employ the term tendentiously; nationalists are 'others', often Central and East Europeans.

Churchill and De Gaulle were fierce nationalists but rarely so described in British or French literature. By contrast, Masaryk has often been regarded as a 'Czech nationalist', even if his 'nationalism' was milder than that of Churchill and De Gaulle. Ironically, the Czech historical tradition views Masaryk as a critic of Czech nationalism: his denunciation of literary forgeries; criticism of antisemitism during the so-called Hilsner affair; visiting, when President, the German theatre in Prague to signal protest against anti-German riots in 1934.

Current usage of the term supports Hroch. The entry 'English Nationalism' in Wikipedia focuses on early nation-state formation while omitting the 19th and 20th centuries almost entirely. There seems to be little English nationalism between the Stuarts and Brexit. Academic work on the subject was rare before Brexit, often equating nationalism with the drive for a future state.

'Nationalism' has thus been for Hroch both too broad and too narrow. While for the post-1800 history of the West only chauvinism is treated as nationalism, accounts of East-Central Europe employ the term in a sweeping way, applying it to the entire modern political class (exceptions being such groups as nationally indifferent aristocrats or peasants). Interestingly, socialism and communism are mostly disregarded by students of nationalism, with later state socialist regimes being labelled as 'national communism', in which the former matters more than the latter.

Important is Hroch's argument that there is no typical East-Central European 'ethnonationalism'; one encounters ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and other such features in all national movements. Ethnonational cleavages seem prominent in Catalonia, Belgium, and Ireland nowadays. Hroch's careful distinctions between national identity, national consciousness, national awareness, patriotism, chauvinism, national loyalty and so forth, serve as safeguards against sweeping umbrella terms.

Hroch's differentiations, balance, and combination of various factors was partly a rejection of class determinism, best embodied in Stalin's thesis that nations were products of the bourgeoisie's struggle for markets. Positively, it dovetails with the post-1956 shift towards revision, new beginnings, and experimentation. I am not the first to regard *Vorkämpfer* (Hroch, 1968) as a post-Stalinist book, one that breathes an optimistic humanism in asserting the almost immaculate nature of the scholarly phase A as one not 'soiled' by political aims.

Today many scholars would criticise Hroch's narrow concept of politics, contrasting it to a view of politics as fluid, decentred, and interwoven with knowledge. There appears something idealistic about Hroch's Phase A, with its actors depicted as 'enthusiasts' engaged in an intellectual game. The qualitative distinction between culture and politics finds temporal expression in the turn from Phase A to Phase B, marked by a deliberate decision of a younger generation of patriotic scholars to become 'agitators'. This moment constitutes, as the title of one of Hroch's later

books goes, the 'threshold of national existence' (Hroch, 1999) when the historical actors see themselves entering a new epoch.

Hroch's lack of interest in aggressive nationalist politics - 'nationalism' - has often been noted. His concern has been with national movements as emancipatory, not how state-nations consolidate power and turn reactionary. His treatment of post-communist nationalist conflicts has mainly paid attention to the emancipatory efforts of formerly 'dominated' nations against 'dominant' ones: Slovaks against Czechs, Slovenes and Croats against Serbs, Lithuanians and Latvians against Russians. He has expressed concerns about the re-nationalisation of Germany, but not engaged academically with the issue. However, using Hroch's conceptual apparatus to study the diversity of national politics and sentiments within 'consolidated' nations might yield important results.

While maintaining a detached attitude towards the 'cultural turn' and its impact on nationalism studies, Hroch has considered and even integrated culturalist views into his work, particularly from the late 1990s (for instance, Bourdieu's ideas on language and power). Often his criticism of 'fashions' was less directed against a new subject than the concepts with which cultural history operated. I vividly remember his uneasiness about the notion of 'master narrative' which he rejected as new coinage for an old idea. He did maintain certain positions. For example, while historiography was increasingly interpreted in the 1990s in terms of its alleged complicity with aggressive nationalism and as a 'legitimizing discipline', Hroch insisted that not all historical knowledge and imagination must necessarily bolster or challenge existing power relations.

Already in the 1970s Hroch examined the role of historical fiction and textbooks for nation-formation, distinguishing between a rationally reflected national consciousness (*národní vědomí*) and a less reflected, elemental *národní povědomí* (untranslatable from Czech but anticipating Assmann's concept of communicative memory) (Hroch, 1976). Later Hroch adopted related concepts such as 'collective memory', though characteristically using quotation marks to indicate detachment. In 1997, Hroch organised a workshop titled *National History: Construct or/and Reality?*, engaging critically with what he regarded as a fashionable subject while exploring its scientific potential. The binary opposition of construct and reality sounded old-fashioned, yet Hroch's goal was to trace the entanglements and interactions between various aspects of *národní povědomí*.

While rejecting monocausal, determinist explanations in favour of pluralist accounts, Hroch has constantly advocated precisely formulated "why questions". Why did those patriots venture upon such a risky enterprise as a pro-national agitation within a largely indifferent 'ethnic group'? Such research questions have been an important legacy for most of his Prague pupils who, to Hroch's chagrin, turned to contemporary history, especially the history of communism. Why did so many people join the communist movement—not only industrial workers but middle-class intellectuals, Jews and women—even when the prospects of success were slim? Such 'why' questions are equally relevant for exploring historical situations where the movement has 'succeeded' and transformed into established regimes. An emphasis on different forms of belief (and disbelief) in communism might help us understand why in 1956 many left but at the same time many remained, recasting their belief so as to construct a sense of a new beginning. Why did so many resign themselves to the considerably shrunken utopia of 'developed socialism' after 1968, and why did increasing ideological indifference enable a stagnating regime to endure for more than 20 years while eventually paving the way for its final collapse? Translated into the history of nationalism, the question could be asked to what extent 'national indifference' worked paradoxically as a vehicle rather than an obstacle for the 'success' of national movements?

It remains important to follow Hroch's pan-European view of history, one not predetermined by pigeon-holing research problems into specific 'historical regions' but driven by an interest in comparable historical phenomena which, while occurring in different places at different times, were essentially similar and therefore explicable (an approach that Maria Todorova, 2005, has called 'relative synchronicity'). Such a view of European history does not consider phenomena as prisoners of 'regions' or 'systems', whether East and West, Socialism and Capitalism, Dictatorship and Democracy, but as manifold variations of the paths to and through modernity. This battle for a genuinely comparative and cross-regional European history has not yet been won and continues to need enthusiastic agitators like Hroch himself.