Pod Stalinem: Field notes from another modernity

SAGE

David Frisby's work was a career-long engagement with modernity, informed by a tradition of classical social theory whose neglect in Anglo-American sociology David did much to remedy through his translations as well as his writings: the 'sociological impressionism' that seeks to grasp totalities through 'snapshots' and 'fragments' whose representatives included Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin. Conceived as a homage to David's legacy (and his personal influence on my own intellectual development) rather than a commentary on his work, this essay is a Benjaminian *dérive* through twentieth-century Prague, which complements and counterpoints David's beloved Vienna and Berlin. Prague's modern history, I argue, gives Baudelaire's celebrated definition of modernity as '*le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent*' surreally new dimensions. Indeed, the city might well be regarded as a 'capital of the twentieth century' in whose 'ruins' we can begin to excavate the 'prehistory of postmodernity.'

I

'Historic' Prague – as distinct from the conurbation of nineteenth-century tenements and communist high-rises where most Praguers live – has five boroughs. Hradčany, an aristocratic quarter of palaces, churches, and one-time imperial barracks centered on the castle of the same name, dominates the left bank of the Vltava, commanding the city below. The castle is a highly visible center of power, which for most of modern Czech history has meant vice-regal subordination to the imperial elsewhere of Vienna, Moscow, or Berlin. It is a correspondingly ambiguous location. 'A new Posen bloodbath is being prepared in Bohemia,' reported Friedrich Engels in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on June 18, 1848. 'Prince Windischgrätz was positioning his cannons against Prague on the Vyšehrad and the Hradčany. ... The blood flowed in streams' (Engels, 1973: 125–126).

The crushing of the Pentecostal Rising proved to be a turning point for the 'springtime of nations,' allowing order gradually to be restored throughout the Austrian Empire. The following decade would be known as the 'Bach absolutism' after Emperor Franz-Josef's tough interior minister Alexander Bach, who ruthlessly suppressed any signs of dissent in Bohemia. The Habsburg Empire disintegrated in 1918, but after a mere twenty years in which the Czechoslovak presidential standard fluttered over the castle bearing the Hussite motto '*Pravda vítězí*' (Truth will prevail), Adolf Hitler was photographed looking out over his latest acquisition from a Hradčany window.[1] Thirty years later, after the Soviet invasion of August 21, 1968 had crushed Alexander Dubček's short-lived Prague Spring, the castle became the official residence of Gustáv Husák, whom Milan Kundera dubbed 'the president of forgetting' (1980 [1979]: 158). According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Hradčany is the largest castle in the world. It may or may not have inspired Franz Kafka's last novel, *The Castle* (1997 [1926]), which he left unfinished at his death.

Huddled beneath Hradčany, hemmed in by the looming mass of Petřín Hill, the steep steps and twisting lanes of the Little Quarter (Malá Strana) tumble prettily down to the river, where they sort themselves out into a sweet neighborhood of parks, gardens, and quiet little squares. Across the Vltava lie the Old Town (Staré Město), whose gothic towers and medieval streets seem to have been there since time out of mind, and Josefov, the former Jewish ghetto, which is almost as old but was actually formally incorporated into the city only in 1848. The Fifth Quarter (*pátá čtvrť*), as Josefov became, takes its name from Emperor Josef II, who tried to 'emancipate' Austria's Jews in 1782. It used to be known as Židovské město (Jews' Town) – a place of and for others, cordoned off behind walls and chains. Jews, the journalist and 'mar-tyr' of the 1848 revolution Karel Havlíček Borovský reminded his compatriots in 1846, were 'a separate, Semitic nation which lives only incidentally in our midst and understands or knows our language.'[2] Beyond the semi-circle of streets formed by National Avenue (Národní třída), Na příkopě (On the Moat), and Revolutionary Avenue (Revoluční třída) lies the New Town (Nové Město). Until 1919, National Avenue was called Ferdinand Avenue (Ferdinandova třída) after Emperor Ferdinand I, while Revolutionary Avenue honored Franz-Josef's wife Elisabeth (Elisčína třída).[3]

The ample squares and generous boulevards of the New Town may suggest a modernist spirit, but Charles IV laid them out in the fourteenth century. The 'Father of the Land' (*Otec vlasti*), as Charles is known, gave the city the famous stone bridge that has borne his name (only) since 1870, as well as the oldest university in Central Europe, founded in 1348. The convolutions of the university's history are typical of the city. A Czech University of Prague was formed by secession from the Karl-Ferdinand University in 1882, but it was this upstart body that was declared the sole legitimate successor to Charles's ancient foundation by the new Czechoslovak state in 1920 and invested with all the buildings, archives, 'insignia, books, seals, pictures, and other objects of historical note that belonged to Prague University … before 1882.'[4] The German University was finally dissolved by President Edvard Beneš's decree of October 18, 1945 – part of a series of measures of ethnic cleansing that would shortly culminate in the expulsion from the country of Czechoslovakia's three million German-speakers. Little trace of the Bohemian Germans' centuries-long presence in the city remains today, beyond forgotten names on unvisited graves. But surviving photographs tell a different story, revealing an

urban landscape that (as Franz-Josef put it on a rare visit to Prague in 1868) 'has a thoroughly German appearance' (quoted in Taylor, 1990 [1948]: 181).[5] There is no more poignant illustration of Roland Barthes's insight that every photograph is an anticipation of a death to come (2000 [1980]: 95–96). Prague is a palimpsest of overwritings and erasures, a city whose countenance alters according to when we are talking and in whose language.

Charles IV was 'able to speak, read, and write not only Czech [his mother's tongue] but also French, Italian, German, and Latin, such that we had equal command of all these languages.'[6] The Europe of nation-states proudly immured in mutual ignorance of one another's tongues was still a long way off. Charles was one of two Holy Roman Emperors to make Prague his imperial capital. The other was Rudolf II (1576–1611), whose glittering court and world-famous cabinet of curiosities attracted the flower of Europe's intelligentsia. Johannes Kepler discovered the laws of planetary motion in a house in Karlova ulice (Charles Street) in the Old Town, the narrow lane that leads, in a meandering manner of speaking, from Charles Bridge to the Small Square (Malé náměstí). The Danish astronomer Tycho de Brahe, who supposedly died of a burst bladder following a Prague banquet, is buried in the Týn Cathedral on the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí), which long ago was a Hussite stronghold. The Italian mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whom the surrealists would retrospectively enlist as one of their own, portrayed Rudolf in 1590–1591 as *Vertumnus*, the Roman god of the seasons, serving up a dazzling *trompe l'oeil* in which the Emperor's face was collaged out of fruits and vegetables. The modern state system, many would argue, had its roots in the Thirty Years War, which, as chance would have it, began on May 21, 1618, seven years after Rudolf's death, with the defenestration of three imperial officials from Hradčany. *Vertumnus* now hangs in Skokloster Castle in Sweden; it found its way north when Queen Christina's soldiers looted Hradčany in 1648, just before the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War and enshrined the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion) as the basis of future relations between states and their subjects.

Arcimboldo's conceit befitted a time besotted with dreams of transmutation. Rudolf's patronage of alchemy – whose distinction from science was not then as clear as it subsequently came to appear – would later lead an enchanted André Breton to baptize Prague 'the magic capital of old Europe' (Breton, 1972b: 255). Out of sorts with modernist clarities, the surrealist leader found distinctions between 'life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low' just as tenuous (Breton, 1972a: 123). Because Prague 'carefully incubates all the delights of the past for the imagination,' he told a 700-strong audience at the Mánes Gallery during his one and only visit to the city in 1935, 'it seems to me that it would be less difficult for me to make myself understood in this corner of the world than any other' (Breton, 1972b: 255–256). He found inspiration in

> … the magnificent [Charles] bridge flanked by statues, leading out of yesterday into forever; the signboards, lit up from within – at the Black Sun, at the Golden Tree, and a host of others; the clock [in the Jewish quarter] whose hands, cast in the metal of desire, turn ever backward; the street of the Alchemists [in Hradčany].
>
> (Breton, 1978: 286–287)

He was especially taken with the image of Letohrádek Hvězda (Star Castle) at Bílá hora on the western outskirts of the city. A postcard of Hvězda found its way into *Mad Love*, published in 1937, illustrating the sentence 'On the edge of the abyss, made of philosopher's stone, the starry castle opens' (Breton, 1987 [1937]: 97). Whether Breton was aware of it or not, Bílá hora – the White Mountain – is the site of the battle of November 8, 1620 where Emperor Ferdinand II defeated the Rising of the Czech Estates and Bohemia lost its independence for the next three centuries. Over the following decades the Hussite cradle of the Protestant Reformation metamorphosed into a bastion of the Counter-Reformation, and Prague became a showcase of the baroque.

II

A character in Ivan Klíma's novel *Love and Garbage* remarks that 'In our country everything is forever being remade: beliefs, buildings and street names. Sometimes the progress of time is concealed and at others feigned, so long as nothing remains as real and truthful testimony' (Klíma, 1993 [1986]: 45). The protagonist, a writer turned street cleaner, is a representative figure from an Alice in Wonderland time in which doctors became window cleaners[7] and professors morphed into stokers. But Klíma's observation applies to more than just the period of 'normalization' (*normalisace*) between the 1968 Soviet invasion and the Velvet Revolution that ended communist rule in November 1989. The Czech twentieth century gives Baudelaire's definition of *modernité* as '*le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent*' (2005 [1863]: 12), which was much loved by David Frisby, surreally new dimensions. Beginning the era as a provincial backwater in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prague has successively been capital of the most easterly democracy in interwar Europe (1918–1938), a Nazi Protectorate (1939–1945), a westerly satellite of the Soviet imperium (1948–1989) and a born-again paragon of George W. Bush's New Europe (1989 onward), shifting borders and gaining and losing populations along the way. Punctuated by crises that mark the turning-points of the age, this is a locale in which the normal condition of being is metamorphosis – to invoke the title of another of Franz Kafka's fictions, in which Gregor Samsa famously woke up one morning to find himself transmuted into a repulsive giant bug (Kafka, 1995). Here, it is the phantasmagoria of identity ('the sameness of a person or things at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else,' as the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it) that belongs to the realm of dreams.

To tourist eyes, accustomed to tuning out whatever disrupts the generically historic, Prague presents an agreeably unspoiled prospect. But the city experienced a major Hausmannesque facelift at the turn of the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1910, some 1,500 buildings were torn down in the five boroughs, amounting to almost half of all residential housing in the historic districts. Of these, 620 were casualties of the *asanace*, as the slum-clearance plan initiated by City Council in 1893 was called; the others fell victim to unplanned progress (Bečková, 2002: 18). Like the English words *sanitation* and *sanity* and the French *cordon sanitaire*, the Czech neologism *asanace* has its roots in the Latin word *sanitas*. It is a telling bundle of associations, speaking eloquently of modernist anxieties on the uneasy borderline where words meet things. Whether or not it was a premonitory instance of that *hasard objectif* of

which Breton spoke in his 1935 lecture at the Mánes Gallery, the *asanace* chiefly afflicted the former Jewish ghetto and adjacent areas of the Old Town. Only six synagogues (out of eighteen) were saved from the wrecker's ball, along with the Old Jewish Cemetery and the Jewish Town Hall. Breton's backward-turning clock still adorns the Town Hall, following the Hebrew numbers counter-clockwise round the dial, but whose time it tells is anyone's guess. Today all these buildings form a part of the Jewish Museum, which was founded in 1906 by Zionists anxious to save artifacts from the demolished synagogues. During World War II the Nazis turned the museum into a surreal monument to 'an extinct race'; it soon amassed the world's largest collection of Jewish religious artifacts outside Israel. Its treasures are almost all that is left today to recall one of the largest and most culturally significant Jewish communities in Western Europe (Altshuler, 1983). Most of those who survived the Holocaust (the names of 77,297 victims from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia are handwritten on the Pinkas Synagogue walls) emigrated after 1945.

Replaced by eighty-three buildings on ten broad streets, the 'dark corners, the secret alleys, shuttered windows, squalid courtyards, rowdy pubs, and sinister inns' of the old ghetto (to quote the unreliable testimony of the Czech jazzman Gustav Janouch, who claimed to be quoting Franz Kafka[8]) receded into the recesses of memory, where they would fuel the imagination of Czech decadents, expressionists, and surrealists for a century to come – not to mention foreigners like Breton, eager to find a mysterious east at the very center of old Europe. Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, gave the young Guillaume Apollinaire, who was the first to use the word *surréalisme*,[9] a tour of 'the beauties and sights of Prague' (Apollinaire, 1967 [1902]: 4) in 1902. The backward-turning clock duly made its way into Apollinaire's best-known poem, 'Zone,' a cornerstone of European modernism (Apollinaire, 1995 [1913]: 8–9). Having sampled the Old Town Square, the Old-New Synagogue, Charles Bridge, Hradčany, Saint Vitus's Cathedral, and Wenceslas Square, the pair wound up in Josefov, where Ahasuerus had his way with a *fessue et tétonnière* Hungarian hooker and Apollinaire admired his host's magnificent 'circumcised penis ... striped with burnt sienna, scarlet and the dark violet of stormy skies' (Apollinaire, 1967 [1902]: 12). After the last restrictions on their residence were lifted in 1848, better-off Jews had rapidly escaped to the upscale districts of the upper New Town, Královské Vinohrady, and Bubenec, leaving the ghetto to the ultra-orthodox and the very poor. The underworld soon moved in.

Whether the *asanace* was inspired more by modernist yearnings for social hygiene or the lure of the filthy lucre to be made out of what was now prime downtown real estate is open to debate, but Prague's *fin-de-siècle* makeover was undoubtedly inflected with all the intolerances of the Czech 'national revival' (*národní obrození*). 'He who wants to be a Czech must cease to be a Jew,' warned Karel Havlíček Borovský (Borovský, 1846, in Masaryk, 1920: 447). This is emphatically not a corner of modernity in which (to recall one of the most spectacularly inaccurate of all modernist prophecies, from Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*) 'national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible' (Marx and Engels, 1973: 71). It was precisely the technologies of the modern world (the factories that brought hundreds of thousands of Czech-speaking country folk flooding

into the city, mass elementary education and popular entertainment, affordable books, newspapers, and illustrated magazines) that enabled the mind to be narrowed to a national compass in the first place.[10] Beginning in the quixotic efforts of a ragged assortment of lexicographers, poets, historians, and patriotic priests during the first half of the nineteenth century, the *obrození* amounted to little before 1848. But as soon as Vienna reluctantly permitted a measure of civic freedom to return with the October Diploma of 1860 and the February Patent of 1861, Czech 'awakeners' (*buditele*) colonized Bohemian society from top to bottom. That the 'reborn' Czech national community was as imagined, and its traditions as invented, as any other did not make it any the less real. Schools, newspapers, magazines, theaters, artists' societies, choirs, gymnastic clubs, and even voluntary firefighters' associations were all reconfigured along rigorously ethnic lines. Where in 1800 language had divided classes (the educated folk spoke German, the plebs Czech), by 1900 it solidified and distinguished ethnicities. Not the least of the *fin-de-siècle* battles between Bohemia's national communities – as they had by then undoubtedly become – was over street names. The everyday matters. As the surrealists never tired of insisting, it is where the truly marvelous is to be found.

The main artery of the new Fifth Quarter was Nicholas Street (Mikulášská ulice, to German-speakers Niklasstraße), which gouged its way from the Old Town Square to Jan Koula's elegant art nouveau Svatopluk Čech Bridge (Čechův most) over the Vltava. Mikulášská was named in honor of Tsar Nicholas II, reflecting the wider pan-Slavist enthusiasms of the time. Though Karel Havlíček Borovský and the historian and 'Father of the Nation' (*Otec národa*) František Palacký warned of the dangers of Russian despotism, Mikoláš Aleš was not alone in believing that 'with us it will be well when the cossacks are in the Old Town Square' (quoted in Neumann, 1952: 22). Having first shot to fame with his paintings of scenes from Czech myth and legend for the National Theater, Aleš spattered Prague with signifiers of its recovered Czechness. Princess Libuše, the mythical founder of the city, prophesies in the vestibule of the Old Town Hall; a dashing young Saint Wenceslas rides across the façade of the Štorch bookstore in the Old Town Square; country folk in 'national costume' till the fields on the Rott House on Malé náměstí, the Wiehl House on Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí), and even the American Bar in the Municipal House (Obecní dům), reminding the newly urbanized Czech masses where they came from and who they were. Nicholas Street was optimistically renamed Paris Street (Pařížská ulice) in 1926, reflecting the more westerly outlook of the new Czechoslovak state. Aleš's frescoes nevertheless continued to lurk in the national unconscious, familiar images that appear to 'stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges' (Benjamin, 1999 [1940]: 390).

'We understood you and shall always understand you, just as everyone certainly will in our Slav nation who is not a reactionary,' wrote the young Alfons Mucha to Aleš in 1886 (quoted in Volávková, 1964: 224). The older painter was under attack for illustrating the so-called Dvůr Králové manuscript, a Czech *Songs of Ossian* forged by the first librarian of the National Museum, Václav Hanka. Though suspicions had existed ever since Hanka first claimed to have 'found' the manuscript in

1817, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and the philologist Jan Gebauer definitively exposed the fabrication just three years earlier in 1883. To this day, Josef Václav Myslbek's statues of Záboj and Slavoj, the heroes of the poem, stand on guard outside the cemetery at Vyšehrad (where Alfred von Windischgrätz also placed his cannons). Originally they were sculpted for the pylons of the Palacký Bridge, but they were moved after an Allied bombing raid during World War II. It was Hanka's burial in 1861 that began the modern transformation of Vyšehrad into a last resting place for 'those who by their brilliant writings or artistic endeavors, important inventions or uncommon sacrifices, arduous battles or beneficial successes helped to spread the glory of the Czech nation even beyond the borders of this our motherland.'[11] 'Nations will not perish, so long as the language lives,' reads the inscription on his grave.[12] Mucha is better known in the West as Alphonse Mucha, the darling of Parisian art nouveau who first hit the headlines with his sinuous posters for Sarah Bernhardt in *Gismonda* in 1895. Funded by the American Slavophile millionaire Charles R. Crane, Mucha turned his back on *la ville-lumière* in 1910, returning to Prague and replacing his lucrative commissions for Perfecta cycles, Job cigarette papers, and Lefèvre-Util biscuits 'exclusively with work for the nation.'[13] Aside from postage stamps, banknotes, and posters and pageants (see A. Mucha, 2005) for patriotic causes, he devoted the next two decades to his monumental *Slav Epic* (*Slovanská epopej*). The twenty gargantuan paintings rewrite Czech history as exactly that, situating 'Master Jan Hus Preaching in the Bethlehem Chapel,' 'The Hussite King Jiří z Poděbrad,' and 'Jan Amos Komenský – Last Days at Naarden' in a pan-Slav pilgrimage that extends from 'The Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy' via 'Holy Mount Athos' to 'The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia' (see Srp, 1994).

Jan Koula's urban renewal scheme of 1897 envisaged Mikulášská as putting the spine back into '*golden, Slavonic* Prague.'[14] To the south, the avenue would extend beyond the Old Town Square to Na příkopě, where it would link up with Wenceslas Square; to the north, it would cross the Svatopluk Čech Bridge to a triumphal arch cut into the riverbank to Letná Plain, providing the city (in avant-garde leader Karel Teige's words, writing in 1930) with 'a beautiful new axial connection.' Teige's modernist dreams for Prague were akin to Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris: he regarded 'the abolition of the Prague ghetto and the razing of the entire fifth district' as 'important urban developments,' though he abhorred 'the monstrous depravity of this new architecture' with its 'apartment buildings ... decorated in false baroque or false vernacular motifs, with tasteless towers, gables, and other bric-a-brac' (Teige, 2000 [1930]: 79–80). Wenceslas Square had been semiotically reclaimed for Czechness in 1848, when at Karel Havlíček Borovský's suggestion it was renamed after the national patron saint. For the last five hundred years it had been the Horse Market. By the 1920s it blazed with neon; only one of its sixty-odd buildings predated the nineteenth century, and most had gone up during the previous fifty years (Janková, 2006). Josef Václav Myslbek's equestrian statue of Wenceslas was installed at the head of the square in 1913 in front of the palatial new building into which the National Museum – the cradle of the national revival – had moved in 1890. Josef Schulz's design for the museum was chosen over its competitors largely because of its pantheon for statues of the Czech great and good; its inhabitants have played musical chairs ever since,

moving in and out with every turn in the political wind. The Letná plateau, Koula thought, would make the perfect site for the parliament building of an independent Czech state. Cleaving the city from the museum to the parliament, Mikulášská would stamp the victorious progress of the modern Czech nation on the ancient Bohemian capital, clearing a highway through the back alleys of the past.

When Czechoslovakia finally proclaimed its independence from Austria-Hungary in the Municipal House on October 28, 1918 it caught everyone by surprise. Throughout the twenty-year existence of the first Czechoslovak Republic, parliament met in the 'temporary' space of the Rudolfinum, a complex of art galleries and a concert hall built on the right bank of the Vltava in 1885. Some might think it was an appropriate venue, given the extent to which the nation represented was a confection of its writers, composers, and artists. There were several competitions (and some fine modernist designs)[15] for a new parliament building on Letná, but nothing ever came of them. By the time Czechoslovakia got its own purpose-built parliament in 1973, the country was languishing in the depths of normalization. Flanked by the National Museum and the Smetana Theater – formerly the New German Theater, built to rival the Czech National Theater in 1886–1887 – Karel Prager's brutalist structure gave rise to the inevitable joke: 'What is a parliament? Something between a theater and a museum.' Prague is a place in which the *humour noir* beloved of André Breton (see Breton, 1997 [1940]) is popular culture; rich in fertile ironies, this is the same dark soil that nourished Franz Kafka's *Trial* (1999 [1925]) and *Castle* (1997 [1926]), Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk* (1973 [1923]), Václav Havel's *Memorandum* (1990 [1965]), Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude* (1990a [1977]) and *I Served the King of England* (1990b [1983]), and Milan Kundera's *Laughable Loves* (1999 [1969]).

Wenceslas Square is still separated from the Old Town Square by a warren of medieval alleys, which few would nowadays dream of tampering with in the name of any variety of progress. History is money, attracting as many tourists to the city as the cheap and excellent beer. The riverbank at Letná is as steep as ever. Today, a grand staircase labors its way up the slope from the Svatopluk Čech Bridge to a massive granite-faced concrete plinth. On the plinth stands a giant metronome. Why Vratislav Novák's kinetic sculpture (which was placed here in 1991) should merit such a grandiloquent setting is unclear. The answer – as is often the case in Prague – lies in an absence, of which the incongruously monumental steps are the sole surviving Derridean trace. Here, once upon a time, at the very apex of Karel Teige's 'beautiful new axial connection,' stood the largest statue of Joseph Stalin in the world.

III

The best of the ninety-five entries in the 1949 competition for the Stalin memorial was judged to be the collaborative proposal put together by the architect Jiří Štursa and his wife Vlasta Štursová (who were responsible for the steps) and the sculptor Otakar Švec. Jiří Štursa is the nephew of Jan Štursa, Josef Václav Myslbek's assistant and successor at Prague's Academy of Fine Arts, whose *Puberty* and *Melancholic Girl* are among the jewels of the Czech Secession. The fact that Jiří had worked in 1938 on a design for a memorial – on the very same spot – to Czechoslovakia's first

president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, likely appeared less ironic then than it does now; there are many ways of joining the dots to form coherent historical narratives, and to see communist Czechoslovakia as the true incarnation of Masarykian ideals was not such a surreal stretch in the immediate postwar years. President Beneš described the 1945 Košice Program, which promised 'a new real *people's government* [*lidovláda*]' rather than 'a simple return to what existed before Munich,' as exactly that (Beneš, 1945: 227). Czechoslovak Post issued stamps in 1947 that evenhandedly commemorated the tenth anniversary of Masaryk's death and the fortieth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. Interviewed for the PBS TV series *The People's Century* shortly before his death in 1995, Jiří Štursa reminded viewers that the Dirty Thirties 'were difficult times. And frankly, people were looking eastward toward the Soviet Union, where we could see a new society which rid itself of unemployment' (Štursa, n.d.). Švec, too, had no apparent difficulty in reconciling modernism with Stalinism – at least not until he committed suicide shortly before his monstrosity was unveiled to the public in 1955. Another pupil of Myslbek's (as well as a one-time assistant of Jan Štursa's), he was probably best known for the *Sunbeam Motorcyclist*, which stood 'as a symbol of the new relation between man and machine' outside the Czechoslovak pavilion at the 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris – the World's Fair where Art Deco got its name and Czechoslovakia, which was a cauldron of artistic modernism between the wars (see Anděl, 1989, 1993; Sayer, in press), won more prizes than any nation except France (Brunhammer, 1976: 180–181).

Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký solemnly laid the foundation stone for the Stalin memorial on the generalissimo's seventieth birthday on December 21, 1949.[16] In an unmistakable echo of František Palacký's laying of the foundations for the National Theater in 1868 (see Heller, 1918) – a moment full of symbolism for the national revival – stones from significant Czech locales were embedded in the foundation. As in 1868, one hailed from Říp, the mountain from which, after long wanderings, the legendary forefather of the nation, Praotec Čech, looked out and decided he had found home. But in this case the 'sacred places' had subtly shifted. Where there is a stone in the National Theater donated by Czechs in Chicago bearing the motto 'What blood unites, the sea cannot divide' (*Co krev pojí, moře nerozdvojí*),[17] Letná bore no reminders of émigrés – whose numbers had swollen after the communists' coup of Victorious February (*Vítězní únor*) 1948. The compass of the nation had shrunk further still, stopping at the western border. Instead, the monument incorporated souvenirs from the Old Town Hall, which had been partially destroyed during the Prague Uprising of May 5–8, 1945, as well as Ležáky, a village the Germans burned to the ground on June 24, 1942 in retaliation for the assassination of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich. Ležáky's adult inhabitants, male and female, were all shot. With the exception of the Šťulík sisters Jarmila and Marie, who were judged capable of 'Aryanization,' the village's children were gassed in the extermination camp at Chelmno in Poland. The presence of a stone from Velehrad, where Saints Cyril and Methodius converted Great Moravia to Christianity in the ninth century – the subject of one of the canvases in Mucha's *Slav Epic* – may strike an incongruous note in this symphony of signifiers, until we recall the pan-Slav

connection. Mikoláš Aleš's cossacks came to the Old Town Square when the Red Army liberated Prague on May 9, 1945, and the *holubičí národy* (dovelike nations) of *slovanstvo* (Slavdom) dear to the nineteenth-century nationalist imagination took wing again in the shape of the peace-loving socialist camp. Aleš's own images were to be found everywhere during these years, flashing up as the politics from which history emerges in the 'now of its recognizability' (Benjamin, 1999 [1940]: 473). The centennial of his birth was named the Aleš Year (*Alšův rok*) and celebrated with the largest art exhibitions the city had ever seen (see Sayer, 1998a).

Zápotocký peppered his paean to 'this great friendship with the Soviet Union and its great leader' with a potpourri of allusions that located his country's recent historical experience in an age-old struggle of Teuton and Slav. '*Toto přátelství nedalo zahynouti nám*' (this friendship did not allow us to perish), he says, and '*nedá zahynout ani budoucím*' (it won't let our descendants perish either). He is playing here on the words of the Saint Václav chorale '*Nedej zahynouti nám i budoucím*' (do not let us or our descendants perish), one of the oldest hymns in the Czech language. 'To Stalin, the Soviet Union, and socialism we shall remain faithful' (*věrní zůstaneme*), he goes on, invoking the motto under which Czechoslovak troops had served on both the eastern and western fronts during the war that had recently ended (quoted in *Svému osvoboditeli*, 1955: 9). Edvard Beneš had pronounced the same words over Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's coffin in September 1937. A year later the state Masaryk had created was dismembered at Munich. Six months after that, on March 15, 1939, Slovakia became a nominally independent country and the Wehrmacht marched unopposed into what was left of the Czech Lands. Unless we count *Anschluß* Vienna, Prague was occupied for longer during World War II than any other European capital. These memories were still fresh and raw. They played a large part in the communists' triumph in the national elections of May 1946, in which they formed the largest party and won 38 percent of the national vote.

If the message of the Stalin memorial was the Orwellian one that Big Brother is watching over you *na věčné časy* (for all eternity),[18] there are few locations in Prague as well suited for panoptical gazing. As Vlasta Štursová helpfully explained,

> The political significance that the government of the Czechoslovak Republic attributed to the Stalin memorial was already expressed by the chosen site on the edge of Letná Plain. ... [It] commands all the most significant views from the Prague basin, upstream on the Vltava from beyond the National Theater, as well as from the Smetana and Old Town Squares, and downstream from the embankment as far as Libeň. The monument is a pronounced architectural dominant, which marks out Letná from both close and distant vantage points (from Vítkov, from Vinohrady), and is a sovereign element in panoramic pictures of the city.

The memorial was to be 'a new landmark, linking with places that hitherto dominated the Prague basin and which are most deeply inscribed in the history of the nation – with Žižka's mountain at Vítkov, ancient Vyšehrad, and Hradčany' (Štursová, 1955: 162). The importance of these locations derives not just from their physical prominence in the landscape, but also from their symbolic resonance in the national imaginary. Vyšehrad and Hradčany we know already; Vítkov was the site of the Hussite commander Jan

Žižka's victory over Emperor Sigismund's invading forces in 1420. Visible for miles around, a Memorial of National Liberation (*Památník osvobození*) was built there in 1927–1932, which the communists would later cannibalize as a mausoleum for the embalmed body of the Czechoslovak communist leader Klement Gottwald (see Paces, 2009). Not for the first or the last time, the city's topography was mobilized to reorder the significances of its history. Stalin was seamlessly sewn into the national narrative, which was being rewritten as a subplot in a new Slav epic.

Work on the monument began in February 1952. The colossus took fourteen thousand tons of granite, 600 workers, and 495 days to complete. By then both Stalin and Gottwald, who caught Moscow flu at the generalissimo's funeral, were dead. Švec's sculpture stood 15.5 meters high (a full 30 meters from the base of the plinth), 12 meters across, and 22 meters deep; the block from which Stalin's head was carved alone weighed 52 metric tons. Intended to convey 'the unity of Stalin's person with the people and the eternal brotherhood of the Czechoslovak people with the Soviet people,' the memorial featured four 'representatives of the Soviet people' and 'four representatives of the Czechoslovak people' depicted in best socialist realist style, marching behind Stalin into the Promised Land (*Svému osvoboditeli*, 1955: 10). Vulgar jokes soon made the rounds about the female partisan on the Soviet side of the procession, whose eyes are firmly fixed on the future but whose hand appears to be reaching back into the pants of the soldier behind her. Whatever Švec's intended symbolism, the ensemble soon became popularly known as the 'line-up for meat' (*fronta na maso*).

Na věčné časy is a relative concept in these parts. A year after the Stalin monument was completed, Nikita Khrushchev gave his much-publicized 'Secret Speech' to the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union denouncing the crimes of the period of 'cult of personality' (Khrushchev, 1956). An increasingly visible embarrassment, the memorial was blown up early one morning in 1962. The order of the day – a tall one, in the circumstances – was reputedly that 'It must go quickly, there mustn't be much of a bang, and it should be seen by as few people as possible' (Mácha, 1990). Shelley's couplet 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair' did not appear on the pedestal, but it might just as well have done. After the Velvet Revolution, Prague's first rock club 'Pod Stalinem' (Under Stalin) opened in the vaults beneath the plinth. Some performances there can still be caught on YouTube. The crumbling surrounds of the vanished statue meantime soon got themselves a name as one of the coolest skateboarding arenas in Europe (Yi, n.d.).

IV

'While standing on the Svatopluk Čech Bridge,' recommends Ivan Margolius in his *Prague: A Guide to Twentieth-Century Architecture*, 'look up at the steep slope leading to the Letná Plain. There Future Systems want to locate a memorial to the victims of Communism – a permanent scar carved into the natural setting.' Better known for its audacious Selfridges department store in Birmingham, England (which was described by one reviewer as 'the department store as unalloyed architectural entertainment'; Glancey, 2003), Future Systems was founded by a refugee from normalization, Jan Kaplický, in 1973. 'A cut would be made into the hill,' Margolius goes on,

> … with a stainless steel lightweight bridge suspended between the sloping side walls, rising in forty-two steps symbolizing the number of years of the Communist regime. The walls would be faced with black glass and inscribed with the names of all the innocent who lost their lives. A fitting and appropriate tribute to those who died on the gallows, in prisons, in police and secret service custody, in labor camps and uranium mines and while illegally crossing the country borders. The project lies particularly close to my heart, as my father, Rudolf Margolius, was one of the men unlawfully executed in December 1952 as a result of the infamous Slánský trial.
>
> (Margolius, 1996: 36)

It seemed a reasonable enough suggestion at the time, except that after the flurry of lustration (*lustrace*) that followed the Velvet Revolution most people seemed happier to switch off the light and forget the years of communism, in which too many of them had been too closely implicated for comfort.

Future Systems' memorial was never built, but there has been no shortage of suggestions over the years for this site. We have already encountered plans for a memorial to Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. There was an earlier competition in 1911 for a Letná monument to Jindřich Fügner and Miroslav Tyrš, founders of the patriotic Czech gymnastic society Sokol. Heinrich Fügner and Friedrich Emanuel Tirsch, as these born-again Prague Germans were baptized, are perverse proof of the fluidity of modern identities. Neither mastered more than (in Fügner's own words) 'kitchen Czech' (Dvořáková, 1989: 24–25). Dedicated to 'the physical and in part moral education and improvement of the whole nation, its nurturing for the enhancement of its strength, bravery, refinement, and defense' (Scheiner, 1907: 6), by 1914 Sokol had 194,321 members in Bohemia and Moravia. Czech surrealists reproduced a design for the proposed Fügner–Tyrš memorial side-by-side with a photograph of the Stalin monument being blown up in their 1969 compilation *Surrealistické východisko* (The Surrealist Point of Departure), a last gasp of the Prague Spring that found its way into print before normalization had fully secured its grip (Dvorský et al., 1969: 232). The design was by Pavel Janák, one of the 'cubist' architects who gave early twentieth-century Prague some of the most distinctive modern buildings in the world.[19] One advantage of a surrealist outlook is its ability to couple (in Max Ernst's words, quoted by André Breton in his lecture at the Mánes Gallery) 'two realities which apparently cannot be coupled on a plane which apparently is not appropriate to them' (Breton, 1972b: 275). Though both the Nazis and the communists banned the organization, Sokol's jamborees of massed gymnasts, which were staged in Prague every few years from 1882 onward, uneasily presaged the *mens sana in corpore sano* spectacles that were to prove so popular in both Moscow and Berlin.

Prague is a city to think with. Its modern history enormously complicates our understanding of *la modernité*, but not, I hope, in ways that would have been disapproved of by David Frisby – who first shook me out of my Marxist slumbers and persuaded me that 'The Painter of Modern Life' should be taken as seriously as *Das Kapital*. The spot where Stalin gazed paternally down what once used to be Mikulášská ulice to the Old Town Square is one of many locations in the city where 'things put on their true – surrealist – face' (Benjamin, 1999 [1940]: 464). Mobilized by successive generations as a putative *lieu de mémoire*, Letná is less a place in which 'the collective heritage … was crystallized' and 'a residual sense of continuity remains' (Nora, 1997 [1992]: xv, 1) than

a *lieu d'oubli*, a place of forgetting, of omission, of oblivion. Things have crystalized here only to fall apart; again, and again, and again. But as Milan Kundera has often emphasized, 'Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting' (Kundera, 1995 [1993]: 128). Cutting through the successive strata of erasures, what we uncover in Prague is not a singular modernity but many, each inhabiting its own time *na věčné časy*; not a stately progress but a merry-go-round of mutations, eternally kaleidoscoping on the spot. 'Every old-time painter had his own modernity,' warned Baudelaire (2005 [1863]: 12). It is an aspect of his analysis that social theorists have sometimes been apt to forget.

Walter Benjamin – to whom David Frisby also long ago first introduced me (see Frisby, 1985) – ended his second, 1939 version of his celebrated essay 'Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century' with a bleak vision drawn from Auguste Blanqui's *L'Éternité par les astres* in which 'there is no progress' and 'the universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place.' 'Blanqui … strives to trace an image of progress that (immemorial antiquity parading as up-to-date novelty) turns out to be the phantasmagoria of history itself,' comments Benjamin. He goes on to make the heretical suggestion that 'the world dominated by its phantasmagorias – this, to make use of Baudelaire's term, is "modernity"' (Benjamin, 1999 [1940]: 25–26). Looking out on the dreamworlds of the twentieth century from Letná, it is difficult to disagree. On reflection, maybe Vratislav Novák's metronome is the most appropriate object to occupy this beautiful axial connection, moving neither forward nor backward but simply marking the constant presence of time in human affairs. It is an excellent vantage point from which to begin to rethink, as Benjamin might have put it, the prehistory of postmodernity (see Sayer, in press).

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Notes

1. The photograph was taken on March 16, 1939, the day after German troops occupied the city. It later found its way onto a Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia postage stamp.
2. Borovský (1846), quoted in Masaryk (1920: 446–447). Havlíček (as he is generally known) edited the liberal-nationalist paper *Národní noviny* (National News) until its suppression in January 1850. Twice tried on charges of sedition and acquitted by sympathetic Czech juries, he was exiled without trial to Brixen in the Tyrol in 1851, where he contracted tuberculosis. He died in Prague in 1854, aged 35.
3. Information on the names of Prague streets and other locations in this paper is derived from Čarek et al. (1958); Česká obec turistická (1945); Dopravní podniky hl. m. Prahy (1948); Lašťovka et al. (1998); and Ruth (1903).
4. 'Marešův universitní zákon' (Mareš's University Law, 1920), in Domin et al. (1935: 113–114).
5. For examples of such photographs see Wirth (1942) and the six volumes of *Zmizelá Praha* (1945–1948).
6. Karel IV, 'Vlastní životopis' (Autobiography), in Bláhová (1987: 27).
7. Like the womanizing Tomáš, the (anti-)hero of Kundera (1991 [1984]).
8. Janouch (1953: 80). On Janouch see Škvorecký (1988).
9. Apollinaire coined the word '*sur-réalisme*' in his 1917 play *The Breasts of Tiresias.*

10. See Anderson (1991); Gellner (1993); Hroch (2000). I have discussed the popularization of the Czech national revival after 1860 at length in Sayer (1998b: 82–153.)
11. Petr Fischer, Mayor of Smíchov (who commissioned the pantheon [Slavín] vault in Vyšehrad in which Mucha among others is buried), as quoted in Ruth (1903: Vol. 3, 1147).
12. Personal observation. For an outstanding analysis of the historical significance of Hanka's forgeries (and the works they inspired), see Lass (1988).
13. Alfons Mucha, undated letter of c. 1900, addressee unidentified, quoted in J. Mucha (1989: 145).
14. Mayor Tomáš Černý, inaugural speech of October 8, 1882, quoted in Šolc (1910: 269, emphasis in original). Černý's description of the city provoked the resignation of the last German representatives on Prague City Council.
15. Notably by Jaromír Krejcar, a close associate of Karel Teige, which took second place in the 1928 competition. Krejcar wanted to create 'an open system allowing in the optimum amount of light and air' (see Švácha, 1995: 91–95).
16. Unless otherwise indicated, information relating to the Stalin monument is taken from *Svému osvoboditeli* (1955). This is the official commemorative brochure for the unveiling of the memorial. No author or editor is credited.
17. Personal observation.
18. I am playing here on the ubiquitous slogan of the time '*Se Sovětským svazem na věčné časy*' (With the Soviet Union for all eternity).
19. Janák's sketch for the monument is reproduced in Wegesack (1992: 156).

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