

THE EMPTY CABINET: DEMOCRATIC TEACHING AND THE CZECH UNIVERSITY

by Jon Hauss

There's a Czech joke from the communist period about a professor of sociology—a good Party member—who's known as the expert on 19th-century relations between Bohemians and Moravians. An eager young student comes to visit him in his office. After a few nervous remarks about her own scholarship, she asks, "What do you keep in that tall cabinet behind you?" The professor laughs good-naturedly. "That? That's where I store my research papers. The ones I've been working on for the past 20 years." He unlocks the cabinet, swings the door open. And nothing's there.

I recently returned from two years as Fulbright Professor of Literature at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. This meant working in an academic system only recently freed from direct Soviet-communist control, a system isolated for 40 years from international scholarly exchange, and one in which academic inquiry was often stifled through combinations of party favoritism and secret police intimidation. Under communism, Czechs negotiated an official public life that reduced everything from casual remarks to volumes of poetry to a single state-authorized language. In the 1950s and early 60s, and again under "normalization" in the 70s, violators of this policed language could be stripped of their profes-

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sions, imprisoned, exiled, or worse.

But while alternative discourses and texts were banned from public life, including the life of the university, they often re-emerged in underground networks of discussion, reading, study, and exchange, networks for which texts were also generated through *samizdat* publication—the often hand-typed, carbon-copy manuscripts in which Vaclav Havel’s essays and the novels of Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal appeared.

Hence another Czech joke about empty cabinets, signifying in this

case not the stunning absence of inquiry and exchange in the old university, but the resourcefulness of the underground culture that replaced it: A university librarian gets a call from Party headquarters in Prague. She’s given a long list of books and told to take these down to the third floor and lock them in cabinet B: “We consider these books inappropriate for study. No one is to read them.” Three months later she gets a call from the same office: “You can remove the books from cabinet

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B. We no longer consider them inappropriate.” So she goes down, unlocks the cabinet. And nothing’s there.

One result of Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution” of 1989, which ended communist rule, established multi-party elections, and opened national borders for travel and trade, was that everything about the Czech university—its faculty, curricula, and institutional structures—was suddenly freed of definitive control by the state. In some cases, the results of this liberation were dramatic, as window washers and tractor drivers were suddenly reinstated to their posts as professors of philosophy and chairs of politology. Classrooms, emptied in November ‘89 by a general student exodus to street demonstrations, were filled by students often avid for signs of academic renewal.

In fact, a host of contemporary social issues, along with formerly underground texts and arguments about them, passed directly into many university classrooms. In other cases, change was much less dramatic, partly because of severe economic limitations, but partly, too, because the Czech academy was still dominated by professors and administrators from the former period opposed to the academic diversification desired by many younger colleagues and students.

As a Fulbright professor, I was granted complete freedom in the design and content of my courses by Masaryk University’s Department of English

and American Studies. They asked only that I offer four new courses per term in “advanced literary and cultural studies,” all designed by me, all senior-level. It was the kind of job you dream about, and only later did I recognize that the free rein they gave me was their way of temporarily appeasing student demands for a diversification of curricula, while a powerful minority in the department worked to reconsolidate old curricular structures.

Locked cabinets for books and papers still line the hallways and offices of Czech universities, though their function within a state-centered apparatus of control has passed. Typically, in my first weeks, I would discover that some stack of books I desperately needed to distribute in my next class was locked “in this cabinet right here,” but the key was in a cabinet in Mr. so-and-so’s office, and he wouldn’t be in till next Thursday. Text circulation remains, at Masaryk, tightly guarded, though which texts to guard and why is now less clear.

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During this two-year period, I designed and taught 16 new courses at Masaryk University. A good part of my success with students happened because I gave them exactly what they wanted, which I discovered by talking to the students I met in the month before my first classes began—and by continuing to do so throughout subsequent work there. The students in Masaryk English are amazing: Most speak three or four languages, and their engagement with the problems of linguistic and cultural study is typically quiet and profound.

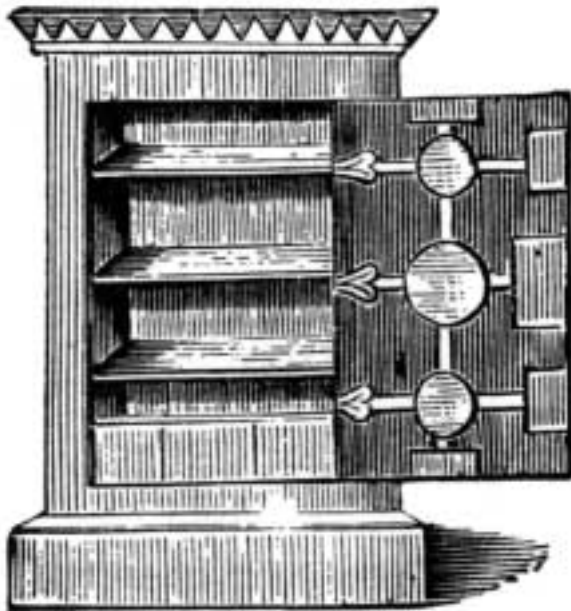
They also have a reputation for sporadic political activity in the department: holding meetings, demanding faculty-student joint meetings, delivering petitions, and posting sudden, wildcard “student evaluations” of specific teachers on university bulletin boards (the department has subsequently instituted a formal procedure for such evaluations). Many of the students told me they wanted courses on modern and contemporary U.S. writers, especially experimental and non-traditional authors. They couldn’t necessarily name who these would be, but it was clear they would prefer to read writers who had not been included in what one student called the “Communist canon” of U.S. literature—writers whom the state had adjudged proper mouthpieces of anti-capitalism, anti-Americanism, and anti-imperialism.

Many of my favorite U.S. writers fall within this “canon”—Faulkner,

Wright, Dos Passos—and their texts, I believe, inherently resist any ideologically fixed uses. Nonetheless, I conceded to student demand for new texts, recognizing that it would be offensive to the students for me to insist on teaching the same texts, even “in a new way”. Students also asked explicitly for introductions to contemporary critical theory, especially for critiques of base/superstructure models of cultural life, but also, paradoxically, for challenges to classic structuralist studies of textual “functions” (more on this in a moment).

In my first year, I offered “Race, Writing, and Masquerade in Contemporary African-American Literature” and “Postmodernism and the Critique of ‘Power’ in Contemporary U.S. Narrative,” as well as courses including the writings of Djuna Barnes, Leslie Silko, Toni Morrison, Kathy Acker, and a yearlong seminar in contemporary developments in critical theory. In the second year, I taught courses on ethnic American life-narratives, Jamaica Kincaid, Paul Auster, Gerald Vizenor, and two courses devoted entirely to theoretical texts by two important Eastern European writers Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Zizek.

Students turned out for my courses in unusually large numbers, and I signed on an average of 10 students above the limit in every course. Within a few weeks, too, the immediate working library I had brought with me had largely vanished from my office, students borrowing everything they could in the way of supplemental materials on course topics. Typically, a book I loaned to one student would return a week-and-a-half later from another half-known student, having traveled in the meantime



through three or four hands. I found myself manically performing at Masaryk the purely impersonal role of conduit for unavailable texts that I ordered in bulk with Fulbright funds and brought back from trips to Prague, Vienna, and the United States, or asked American friends to mail in photocopies. Student interest in the fields these texts represented grew steadily, and, by the end of my first term, 10 students had asked me to direct Magisters' dissertations on these topics.

The dissertations comprised a large portion of my work in the second year, and resulted in what I still consider a stunning range of student accomplishments—from a Toril Moi-inspired study of "silences" in women's writing in the modern period, to a use of Mikhail Bakhtin to elaborate Gerald Vizenor's notion in the American Indian novel *Bearheart*, that "words to the wise are words of surprise."¹

I developed a strong bond with students at Masaryk that has transformed my own sense of the possibilities of teaching and cross-cultural exchange. I remain in contact with many of these students today, through letters and e-mail, and am doing all I can to get many of them into graduate school in the United States and England.

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My relationship with faculty colleagues in the Czech Republic is a different story and involves delicate and specific cross-cultural politics. My colleagues had dealt with a number of American academics before my arrival and were all more or less ironically aware of a common American attitude—the equating of the United States, and therefore all established U.S. academic structures and practices, with "democracy," "freedom," and basically all good human things, and of contemporary Czech life with "the heritage of communism."

It was astounding to see how swiftly this self-congratulatory attitude emerged among the American teachers I met there, in statements like: "Students should learn to write essays in which they freely assert their individual thoughts and feelings, like we do in the United States, instead of the conformist (i.e., "communist") way they do here." Leaving aside the doubtful assumptions about academic life in the United States, there are obvious problems in this monolithic characterization of contemporary Czech life. This life is marked by a long history of military, political, and cultural conquests of the region and by a subtle wealth of resistance to the same—from the days of the Austro-Hungarian empire, ending in

1918 with the formation of the independent Czecho-Slovak Republic (the “First Republic”), through five years of Nazi occupation in WWII, to Soviet communist control beginning in 1948 and lasting for over 40 years.²

American arrogance in the face of this world is simply the latest instance in a history of such presumption by foreign powers. This view fails to recognize resistant traditions in the Czech university that

most American academic institutions haven’t dreamed of—activities such as a deep tradition of “self-teaching” among both teachers and students that involves sharing and informal discussion of available texts; after-class pub arguments; as well as a cultural belief in the inherent value of intellectual inquiry and the arts, with a hard-earned sense of the profound costs and ironic reversals of high-sounding “ideas” when they’re put into practice—in short, a healthy suspicion and challenge by

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students of all easy classroom talk.

Yet striking differences in the Czech system also include an often great distance between teachers and students, a frequent conception, among teachers and administrators, of students as troublesome, rule-breaking children; and a defensive adherence, in some academic departments, to what are construed as “national” traditions against the challenges of the now much wider body of literature, criticism, and theory available in the Czech Republic.

But I wouldn’t have been able to recognize any of these things if I hadn’t kept quiet and listened for a long while, recognizing my own ignorance of the institutional context I had entered, and talking to as many different kinds of people within it as possible: rectors, deans, faculty colleagues, people working in independent academic organizations, and of course students.

I began to recognize that the Masaryk English department was deeply divided and in the midst of slow, painful, and unpredictable transformations. The department divides into two major factions: on one side, a mix of chiefly younger Czechs and a few foreign-nationals, urging a greater responsiveness to student demands and a development and diversification of the curriculum; on the other side, a group of veteran faculty—the minority, but with greater administrative connections and power—who advocate an adherence to “Czech and departmental traditions,” especially the

decades-old centrality of structural-linguistic studies in the department.

A few of these veteran faculty were protégés and friends of Roman Jakobson, who taught at Masaryk for many years, establishing the department as an institutional center for the “Prague Circle” linguistics of the 1920s.³ The remarkable fact that this First Republic scholarly tradition was able to sustain itself at Masaryk under a communist regime resulted from the department’s claim that its “functionalist” study of language was of no threat to the state, and in fact of scientific value within a communist “progress of knowledge.” This claim won for Masaryk English an unheard of freedom from state interference, and an ability to carry on actual research unencumbered by demonstrations of the “laws of dialectical materialism.”

As a result of this history, Masaryk English, and its journal *Brno Studies in English*, remains a strangely persisting final enclave of Prague Circle linguistics. The oldest, as well as the most productive and esteemed representative of this tra-

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dition at Masaryk is a quiet man of polished manners and formal grey suits—the kind of man about whom Czechs say, “He looks like the First Republic.” In the early 1940s, he spent a week in a Nazi prison cell for refusing to give information on Jakobson’s life-in-hiding—a story he tells in a gentle, Oxford-accented way that leaves you absolutely speechless. In department meetings while I was at Masaryk, he sustained the tradition of rising to speak, at which times a respectful silence filled the room as he delivered something like a “discourse”—in the old sense—sometimes 10 or 15 minutes long, at the conclusion of which he would sit down again in silence.

Nobody else did that.

But if I refused an American attitude of blunt cultural arrogance, I also learned to refuse the nostalgic seduction of this kind of performance. Scenes like this led some foreigners toward a kind of paralyzed cultural relativism, as if this tradition represented something called “Czech Culture,” single and forever, with which no outsider must tamper. Everyone in the department deeply respected this professor. *How could you help it?* But this respect became balanced, for many, by a growing suspicion that he and other veteran faculty were willing to undermine the department’s internal democratic procedures—using administrative connections to reconsolidate former positions and privileges.

Most department members respected the structural-linguistic tradition itself, recognizing the obvious fact that its isolating, analyzing, and categorizing practices remain an essential dimension of 20th-century textual studies. What the majority faction opposed was not “structuralism” but the absence in the department of anything *but* structuralism.

The struggle over this issue revolved, during my time at Masaryk, around something called Single English—a special track of courses designed by a former visiting scholar, Douglas Dix⁴, that permitted students to take degrees solely in English, as opposed to the more common double-major.

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Single English allowed students to take a wider range of courses in the department, including courses in the recently designed “cultural studies” category—with the diversity of texts and disciplinary frameworks this heading implies. Single English had been voted into operation two years before my arrival through the procedure of one person, one vote,

instituted in the first days following November '89. About a third of the department's students had signed up for this option, and a number of faculty clearly enjoyed the exploratory kinds of teaching it made possible, having semi-comically “carved up the globe” in a special meeting, each laying claim to a specific region for new study and teaching: “No, *you* take the Carribean; I want Anglophone Africa.”

Despite the general popularity of Single English, the department was suddenly informed that the rector was considering an end to the program. Many of us were shocked at the news, but veteran faculty responded coolly that this was certainly for the best, since the program had undermined “the Masaryk tradition of double majors.” Heated departmental debates commenced on whether to end Single English. In the middle of our third such debate, our oldest colleague stood to speak. He announced that the rector had already acted. “Single English has been removed from the university curriculum,” he said. “No new students will be admitted to the program.”

We sat there in an idiotic, stunned silence, until somebody said, “So there's no point in the discussion we've been having *for the last hour?*” at which our colleague simply sat down again. Fortunately there *was* a point to our discussion. The meeting ended with a group angrily petitioning the rector, after a strong vote in favor of Single English, and the issue is now being renegotiated.

In the immediate aftermath of the petition, another veteran department member moved that we return to the tradition of four votes for senior faculty, one for junior. The motion prompted the same response many of us had experienced the week before; and perhaps one of the most useful things I did at Masaryk was to ask the simple question, at this juncture, "But how will we *decide* whether to re-establish the old voting system? Obviously we'll need to follow current procedure to get there: *one person, one vote.*" After a brief discussion, that's what we did, the motion failing in a familiar tally.

I believe that a collapsed job-market assigns many U.S. college teachers trained in emergent literatures and cultural theory to an itinerancy in which the democratic practice of teaching involves, among other things, the active dissemination of as many unrepresented discourses as you know, for students, within and against the particular institutional monologs you happen to enter.

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These repressed discourses often include texts by women, minority, post-colonial, and now post-communist writers, and by a range of contending theorists on the interactions of language, text, subjectivity, and power. Perhaps the best sign for this kind of teaching is an unlocked university cabinet from which new stacks of texts can be routinely appropriated: in which variant texts and research keep reappearing *and disappearing*. In this sense, what counts for democratic teaching isn't so much a particular kind of textual *content*—and certainly not the jealous guardianship of a single list of canonized texts—as a vigorous circulation of contending textual *kinds*.

I consider it no accident that the unlocked cabinet may also stand for the "place of Power" within a democratic society, as Slovenian political theorist Slavoj Žižek defines it. Following 40 years' experience of a Communist Party claiming to represent, in all its actions, "the will of the People" (people who disagreed were simply "traitors to the People"), Žižek insists on a reconception of democracy, in which "the People" can only be defined through the unforeseeable processes of formal democratic election. Thus democracy is:

a sociopolitical order in which the People do not exist—do not exist as a unity, embodied in their unique representative....Because the People cannot immediately govern themselves, the place of Power must always remain an empty place; any person occupying it can do so only tem-

porarily, as a kind of surrogate, a substitute for the real-impossible sovereign....It is against the background of this emptying of the place of Power that we can measure the break introduced by the “democratic invention” in the history of institutions: “democratic society” could be determined as a society whose institutional structure includes, as a part of its “normal,” “regular” reproduction, the moment of dissolution of the socio-symbolic bond, the moment of irruption of the Real: elections.⁵

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One can almost imagine the United States becoming “democratic” one day, in these terms. But, for this to happen, the languages widely heard, shared, recognized, and available for “socio-symbolic” reconstitutions would need to be multiplied far beyond America’s tired old commentaries on race, class, gender, and sexuality.

I suppose I imagine teaching in the United States as an opportunity for such multiplications, if only from the relatively local and limited

junctions of college teaching posts. Here, I keep reminding myself of Havel’s belief in “the mysterious power of words in human history.” In July of 1989, four months before the fall of the Czech communist regime, he wrote:

I live in a country where a writers’ congress or some speech at it is capable of shaking the system....a country which, twenty-one years ago, was shaken by a text from the pen of my friend Ludvik Vaculik. And as if to confirm my conclusions about the power of words, he entitled his statement “Two Thousand Words”....And it is by no means fortuitous that as I write these words, the present regime in my country is being shaken by a single page of text entitled—again as if to illustrate what I am saying—“A Few Words.”⁶

Havel’s own underground writing and argumentation, in a context of political organizing and alliance-building, helped produce the “Civic Forum” that supplanted the communist regime in November—in a sudden historical reversal that even Havel now says he did not imagine possible when he wrote these words.

Such transformative words emerge, of course, from realms outside those of an isolated and self-repeating “official” discourse. Unlocked cabinets of teaching can become spaces through which such words are continually exchanged, multiplying and contesting both the kinds of texts we read and the kinds of textual frameworks through which we read them. It

goes without saying that the possibility of such renewal is not limited to departments in the post-communist world.

I feel lucky to be working in a college now, in the United States, where many differences of text and critical practice are represented, and where exchanges between individual teachers and students are often vivid and generative. But I recognize too that faculty members rarely meet *each other* across these differences, in argumentative, but also mutually respectful and unforclosing dialogues. Such dialogues are undermined here, and in departments across the United States, by professional defensiveness, off-hand dismissal of unlike-minded colleagues, and a general absence of simple social conversation among differently trained scholars of literature and the arts. These practices close down the exchanges through which broadly democratic decisions—about coursework and syllabi and hiring and research—might be made.

“Empty Cabinet” jokes aren’t exactly a genre unto themselves. There aren’t enough of them. But there would be if we started adding dialogically dead academic departments to the list. Here I mean “empty” in the sense of barren. Any department anywhere can become that kind of joke, though it’s not terribly funny. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Vizenor, 1990, p.128.
- ² Judt, 1992, pp. 79-94.
- ³ Eagleton, 1983, pp. 99-102.
- ⁴ Douglas Dix continues his work in higher education in Prague, where he may be contacted at the following address: P.O. Box 196, 110 01, Prague 01, Czech Republic (douglassdix@hotmail.com).
- ⁵ Zizek, 1989, p.147
- ⁶ Havel, 1990, p.19.

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