Reassessing the Role of the Communist Party in a Socialist Society: The Case of 1960s Czechoslovakia[1]

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This article examines the efforts of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) to discursively anchor its leading role amid the shifting socio-political terrain of the 1960s. While the party's position was clearly defined during the revolutionary stage, the guidelines for exercising its leadership in the socialist society officially declared in 1960 were far less clear. This article focuses on how, over the following years, political discourse increasingly incorporated sociological findings about the structure of socialist society, influencing conceptions of the party's leading role. Yet, once 1968 hit, as the people's demands grew in response to the often-unsatisfactory lived experience in socialist society, the CPCz faced not only the challenge of defining its role but also the necessity of defending it to counteract public discontent. This article thus examines the rhetorical strategies employed by the political elite in the early months of 1968 to navigate this challenge. It argues that two rhetorical figures dominated the discourse: the recurrent term "unity" and the emerging term "trust." These terms allowed the political elite to strike a precarious balance between maintaining continuity and striving for a radical departure from the status quo through hegemonic strategy.

Keywords: Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1960s, social stratification, discourse, hegemony

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Introduction[2]

"Socialism has won in our homeland!" declared the opening statement of the 1960 Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. To support the claim, the adjective "socialist" was added to the country's official name. Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, this triumphant discourse was beginning to show cracks, caused predominantly by failings of the economic system of central planning. These shortcomings prompted the political elite to consider incorporating expert knowledge into political decision-making. This turn to science soon extended beyond the expertise of economists to include sociological research aimed at understanding the character of the newly established – and thus far unknown – (socialist) society. The sociological findings, some serving as the basis for party statements, concurrently prompted the political elite to (re)assess the party's position in the new social terrain, i.e. a terrain where class antagonism was no longer the driving force it had been for capitalist society.

This article maps out how political and scholarly discourse became intertwined in the 1960s and how this dynamic laid the groundwork for the discursive strategies of the political elite in 1968. Discourse is a key concept in this analysis and is understood in the Laclauian sense, which conceptualises discourse as "equivalent to the social production of meaning – that is, to the very fabric of social life," thus extending beyond written material or speech to encompass the dimension of human action.[3] Specifically, this article explores how sociological findings on the fabric of socialist society were interwoven into the political discourse and were reflected in an outlook on the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz). While the party's position was clearly defined in the revolutionary stage, the principles guiding its leadership in socialist society were more ambiguous. The article investigates the CPCz's efforts to anchor its leading role within this context, whose markers were arbitrarily shaped by the initial declaration of socialism's triumph and endorsed by sociologists' subsequent research. The markers of this

2 The authors sincerely thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions, which helped to strengthen the manuscript. The authors would also like to thank Martin Štefek for his careful reading of the article's early drafts and valuable comments.

3 ERNESTO LACLAU, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London 2014, p. 65.

context changed in 1968 due to the people's rising demands rooted in the discrepancy between the promises of socialist society and people's lived experiences. This compelled the CPCz not only to strive to define its role within socialist society but also to alter the discourse to defend it. Accordingly, this article examines rhetorical strategies adopted by the political elite in this pursuit in early 1968. Consequently, it argues that two rhetorical figures dominantly run through the 1968 discourse: a recurring term "unity" and an emerging term "trust" that kept the political elite balancing on the edge between maintaining continuity and pursuing a radical departure from the status quo through hegemonic strategy.

The article unfolds in four steps that correspond to this argument. First, it briefly touches upon the CPCz's conception of its leading role since the takeover of state power in accordance with Marxist doctrine. The section offers a glimpse into the socioeconomic transformation that followed the 1948 coup and situates the enactment of the party's leading role in this context. The aim of the section is to outline the party's baseline position and set the scene for analysing how this position evolved and was challenged in the subsequent years, specifically with the advent of the 1960s and the events brought about by the year 1968. Second, the article recalls the revival of sociology in Czechoslovakia and its findings about the fabric of society and its inner dynamics, which paved the way for the CPCz to (re)assess its position within this society. The reason to focus mainly on sociological research is threefold. First, sociological findings about the structure of socialist society seem to have a direct influence on the ideas of the CPCz's role within society and provided an impetus for its reassessment. Second, compared to the plethora of literature and overall interest in the works of the economic team led by Ota Šik or Radovan Richta's team for the impacts of scientific and technological revolution (or even the interest in the reform of the political system worked on by Zdeněk Mlynář's team), the works of Pavel Machonin's team has not been paid the same amount of attention. Last but not least, the focus on sociological research enables us to access the social reality interpreted through the lens of contemporary science, which was highly valued by the political elite and constitutes a bridge to this elite's rhetoric. The third section captures the displays of public discontent and underlying resentment in 1968, caused by the dissonance between the promises of the political elite about life in a socialist society and people's lived experiences. Finally, the article examines the CPCz's pursuit of a hegemonic strategy defined by rhetorics filled with the terms "unity"

and "trust" in political speeches and programmatic documents, which sought to delimit the prospects of the party's leading role. Departing from both Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis and their genealogy of hegemony, the last part surveys the tension between the more inclusive and controlling tendencies present in the efforts of the CPCz to construct a hegemonic unity.

While the intellectual roots of the Czechoslovak 1960s have long been an enticing topic for historical research, recent years have seen scholars focus more explicitly on the involvement and influence of experts in politics.[4] At the same time, studies have also increasingly emphasised the role of discourse and its transformations.[5] This article connects these topics of interest to provide insight into the discursive strategies of 1968 within a broader intellectual context; specifically, it examines how the influence of 1960s sociology laid the foundations for these strategies. The main criterion for selecting sources in this regard – whether empirical material or sociological research – is therefore their connection to changes in social stratification, in relation to which the Party had to rethink its leading role. Thus, the article engages with contemporary sociological studies, journals that bridged expert knowledge, the party

4 See, e.g. JIŘÍ HOPPE, MARKÉTA ŠKODOVÁ, JIŘÍ SUK, FRANCESCO CACCAMO, *„O nový československý model socialismu": čtyři interdisciplinární vědecké týmy při ČSAV a UK v 60. letech ["Striving for a New Czechoslovak Model of Socialism"]*, Praha 2015; VÍTĚZSLAV SOMMER, *Are We Still Behaving as Revolutionaries?: Radovan Richta, Theory of Revolution, and Dilemmas of Reform Communism in Czechoslovakia*, Studies in East European Thought 69/2017, no. 1, pp. 93–110; VÍTEZSLAV SOMMER, JIŘÍ HOPPE, *How the 'Richta Team' Was Born: The Scientific and Technological Revolution and Political Decision-Making in Czechoslovak Reform Communism*, Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung 69/2020, no. 4, pp. 495–518; VÍTĚZSLAV SOMMER, MATĚJ SPURNÝ, JAROMÍR MRŇKA, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu: technokratické vládnutí v Československu, 1956–1989* [*To Run Socialism like a Firm: Technocratic Governance in Czechoslovakia, 1956–1989*], Praha 2019; MARTIN ŠTEFEK, *Czechoslovakia's Discreet Behavioral Revolution in the 1960s: The Momentum of Convergence?*, Communist and Post-Communist Studies 54/2021, no. 1, pp. 196–212; MICHAEL HAUSER (ed.), *Pražské jaro: logika nového světa: od reforem k revoluci* [*The Prague Spring: The Logic of a New World*], Praha 2022.

5 See e.g. PETR ANDREAS, *Není stále jasné, co jsou to protisocialistické síly: resovětizace KSČ a jejího diskurzu o nepříteli v období československé krize* [*It is Still Unclear What the Anti-Socialist Forces Are*], Dějiny – teorie – kritika 18/2021, no. 2, pp. 183–224; KRISTINA BROUČKOVÁ, *Role ‚ledna' v diskurzu pražského jara* [*The Role of 'January' in the Discourse of the Prague Spring*], Moderní dějiny: sborník k dějinám 19. a 20. století 31/2023, no. 2, pp. 23–51.

organs, and the public (e.g. *New Mind*), transcripts of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPCz meetings, and internal reports, as well as official party statements and documents. Lastly, the article considers both audiovisual and written materials (e.g. television interviews, journal articles) that captured public sentiments in 1968, marked by discontent with unsatisfying aspects of people's lives in a socialist society under the CPCz's leadership.

Transforming the Society: The Role of the Party in the Revolutionary Struggle and After the Triumph of Socialism

With the 1948 coup d'état, later celebrated as a "victory of the working people over the bourgeoisie," Czechoslovakia embarked on a path of radical transformation. A centrally planned socialist economy had now firmly replaced the former capitalist system, which had already been rejected by the Košice Program in 1945. During its early Stalinist era, the Communist regime relied on a revolutionary rhetoric to consolidate its power. Stalin's theory of the intensification of class struggle under socialism provided a theoretical basis for the political trials of this period and for identifying the regime's class enemies.[6] Even in 1958, long after the notorious show trials held at the beginning of the decade, the official commentary on the statutes of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia claimed:

> "The Politics of the Communist Party, which is a vanguard of the working class and all the people, is based on the knowledge that the popular masses led by the working class are an independent and decisive actor in the historically necessary process of the elimination of capitalism and the building of socialism and communism. The party does not conclude from this evaluation of the masses' role that the masses do not need leadership. The successful development and intensification of the popular masses' struggle for socialism and communism is inevitably conditioned by the proper leadership of the Communist Party. For the coming into existence of the Communist Party, the Communists' participation in the struggle of the popular masses, organization, and leadership of this struggle, is also an inevitable result of the lawful development of the society."[7]

6 KAREL KAPLAN, *Nekrvavá revoluce* [*The Bloodless Revolution*], Praha 1993, pp. 183–184.

7 LEOPOLD RYKL, *Stanovy Komunistické strany Československa – ztělesnění leninských norem stranického života a zásad vedení* [*Statutes of the Communist Party*

The principles of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, as proclaimed here, had already become deeply ingrained. Whereas the principal actor of the revolutionary struggle was the working class, given its objective social position in the relations of production, it required an organised force – i.e. the party that enabled it – to advance its revolutionary goals. The Communist Party, in contrast to the mass of individual workers, had "the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."[8] This privileged position of the party regarding the knowledge of the social structure and historical processes ultimately led to the more paternalist Leninist conclusion that the party served as the ultimate source of the workers' political and class consciousness.[9] The Communist Party, with its understanding of historical materialism, thus advanced the objective interests and goals of the working class,[10] around which it unified its distinct members. Consequently, the revolutionary spontaneity was tamed by a centralised party.[11] While these principles were originally elaborated on as a part of a strategy within Communist movements, they soon became ideological support for legitimising Communist regimes. As Maria Markus claims, the Communist states employed a paradoxical reversal of modern legitimation, which was based not on divine order but on the power from below, the sovereignty of the people themselves.[12] By suppressing civil society and popular initiative, Communist regimes ultimately legitimised power through an all-encompassing ideological knowledge that was capable of identifying the interest of the working class, and that resided in the party:

of Czechoslovakia: The Embodiment of Leninist Norms of Party Life and Principles of Leadership], Praha 1958, p. 5.

8 KARL MARX, FRIEDRICH ENGELS, *The Communist Manifesto*, in: Karl Marx: Selected Writings, (ed.) Karl Marx, David McLellan, Oxford 2000, p. 256.

9 "We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without." VLADIMIR ILJIČ LENIN, *What Is to Be Done*, New York 1969, p. 17.

10 NEIL HARDING, *Leninism*, Durham 1996, p. 173.

11 For the dichotomy between spontaneity and centralism, see JONATHAN WHITE, LEA YPI, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, Oxford 2016, pp. 170–179.

12 MARIA MARKUS, *Overt and Covert Modes of Legitimation in East European Societies*, in: Political Legitimation in Communist States, (eds.) Thomas Henry Rigby, Ferenc Fehér, New York 1982, p. 83.

> "Official communist ideology thus transforms the principle of the sovereignty of the people into the sovereignty of the proletariat (based on its historical mission), and then, in a second step, the latter is transformed into the sovereignty of the party (based on its specific knowledge, which confers on it the role of 'vanguard')."[13]

The constitution adopted in 1960 only solidified this stance, declaring: "The leading role in society and the state is held by the vanguard of the working class, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, a voluntary fighting alliance of the most active and conscious citizens from the ranks of workers, peasants, and intelligentsia."[14] In the following sections, we focus on the efforts to secure the hegemonic position of the party and its social conditions. We draw on Laclau's and Mouffe's discourse theory, which views hegemony as both a power relation and a specific political articulation, where "a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it."[15] In the early years of its rule, the Communist Party did not have to engage in a hegemonic struggle, as its position and the universality of the working class were already predetermined by the laws of historical materialism and the continuation of the class struggle. However, the proclamation of the socialist victory in Czechoslovakia, while affirming the political orientation of the previous twelve years, situated the party's firm position within a new, less certain context. While the progressivity of the working class and the party's leading role had seemed like straightforward political principles during the revolutionary period and its immediate aftermath, their place was less clear more than a decade after the seizure of political power.

The origins of the CPCz's faltering position in the 1960s may be traced back already to the late 1950s, when the party began to struggle with multiple circumstances: the effects of economic nivelisation, the development of demands regarding consumption, and the changing political context in the Eastern bloc. With the abolishment of private

13 M: MARKUS, *Overt and Covert Modes of Legitimation in East European Societies*, p. 84. For a similar reversal in the political discourse of Communist elites during the normalisation period, see PETR FIDELIUS, *Řeč komunistické moci* [*The Language of Communist Power*], Praha 2016, p. 39.

14 *Ústava Československé socialistické republiky* [*The Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic*], www.psp.cz/docs/texts/constitution_1960.html (accessed 30 January 2025).

15 ERNESTO LACLAU, CHANTAL MOUFFE, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics,* London 2001, p. x.

ownership and entrepreneurship, the party quickly transformed the social structure of Czechoslovakia into a more egalitarian society. The nivelisation of income levels across various social strata significantly increased economic equality, which served as a support of the communist regime. However, by the mid-1950s, the nivelisation became an impediment to further economic and technical development, as it resulted in insufficient salary evaluations for qualified technical and administrative workers.[16] Whereas the first efforts to de-nivelise income levels began at the turn of the decade, a more efficient adjustment to wage relations did not occur until as late as 1966.[17]

A similar differentiation emerged in the politics of consumption and its ideological framing. In the 1950s, despite the economic growth of 1957, the general orientation toward reducing inequalities as a path to a communist society remained, leading to a "social conception of socialism" whose "goal was to feed and clothe society and secure basic social necessities (such as jobs, pensions, etc.) for the majority of citizens."[18] In the next decade, however, the increase in income led to a diversification of consumer behaviour and preferences, including a shift to an interest in the quality of goods and services. The future development of Czechoslovak society and the fulfilment of its material needs were no longer on a predetermined political trajectory. Instead, the party had to adapt to the needs and composition of an increasingly diverse society. What made this task more challenging was a growing disenchantment with the outcomes of central planning. Despite fluctuations in the Czechoslovak economy over the years, it was in 1962 when the third five-year plan

16 KAREL KAPLAN, *Kořeny československé reformy 1968* [*The Roots of the Czechoslovak Reform 1968*], Praha 2002, p. 15. While the decrease in economic inequality is indisputable, the self-proclaimed egalitarianism of communist regimes has been questioned at least since Milovan Djilas's book *New Class*. Djilas called attention to a new type of inequality and a nascent social elite that enjoyed many privileges because of its proximity to the regime. See MILOVAN DJILAS, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, New York 1957. As shown in the next section, the objections against the equality of political power in Czechoslovakia also came from Machonin's sociological team.

17 For more on the effects of nivelisation and de-nivelisation in the workplaces, especially among industrial workers in the late 1950s, see e.g. JAKUB ŠLOUF, *„Takový socialismus nechceme!" Kultura protestu průmyslového dělnictva v českých zemích v letech 1945–1968, 1968* [*"We Don't Want That Kind of Socialism! The Culture of Industrial-Worker Protest in the Czech Lands 1945-1968"*], Praha 2023, pp. 188–213.

18 K. KAPLAN, *Kořeny československé reformy 1968*, p. 50.

collapsed, leading to a recession – the first since World War II.[19] The situation became more delicate as the generational shift was underway, and the new generation, which had grown up without firsthand experience of the hardships of the First Republic or the war, comprised almost half of the working-age population. Without these experiences, which had been formative and to some extent unifying for the revolutionary generation, the younger generation judged the regime's performance even more critically.[20]

Furthermore, only a year after the socialist constitution was declared, the regime faced significant political challenges that aggravated ideological fractures. In 1961, after Khrushchev publicly exposed the crimes of the Stalinist regime at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the rest of the Soviet bloc countries were urged to confront the remnants of their own Stalinist legacy. The CPCz seized this moment to distance itself from past actions, especially the political trials, by establishing rehabilitation committees. However, this move did little to restore trust, leaving the party vulnerable to both criticism for its past deeds and its initial reluctance to take accountability for its actions.[21] Together, these more or less tangible drawbacks jeopardised the party's legitimacy.

Amid the unfavourable circumstances, an opportunity for bolstering the CPCz's legitimacy emerged yet again at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU, where it was declared that science, from now on, would serve as a pivotal productive force rather than a mere superstructure. This shift assigned science the power to reshape society's thinking and structure. In Czechoslovakia, the belief in scientific progress – framed by the discourse of the scientific and technological revolution – sparked enthusiasm and even united diverse groups both inside and outside the higher political echelons.[22] As Jiří Hoppe notes, despite its vague and underdeveloped

19 E.g. VÁCLAV PRŮCHA et al., *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992 (2. díl)* [*Economic and Social History of Czechoslovakia 1918–1992 (Volume 2)*], Praha 2009, pp. 314–315.

20 K. KAPLAN, *Kořeny československé reformy 1968*, pp. 15–16.

21 Mostly from intellectuals after liberalisation in 1963, the so-called "merciful summer" (milostivé léto), e.g. JAN MERVART, *Naděje a iluze: čeští a slovenští spisovatelé v reformních hnutích šedesátých let* [*Hopes and Illusions: Czech and Slovak Writers in the Reform Movement of the 1960s*], Brno 2010, pp. 66–67.

22 M. ŠTEFEK, *Czechoslovakia's Discreet Behavioral Revolution in the 1960s*, pp. 200–201.

nature, the concept of the scientific and technological revolution, with its optimistic ethos, became an integral part of the party's ideological doctrine by at least 1965.[23] This development not only boosted the credibility of experts but also expanded their role in political decision-making, with their expertise, in turn, lending legitimacy to political decisions.

All these transformations and challenges impacted the perception of the role of the party. Although the 1960 Constitution affirmed the CPCz's leading role, it remained unclear how this role should be enacted in a socialist society whose character was still unravelling. With the diminishing role of class struggle and the changing social context, the party had to rearticulate the terms on which it could represent both the society and its further progressive development. Scholars were eager to contribute to this endeavour, striving "mainly for a more exact model of the party, a more accurate positioning of the party within the structure of socialist institutions, relations, and values."[24] The following sections focus on sociological research into the social structure and attitudes of Czechoslovak citizens, revealing the new context in which the reformist elite of 1968 had to defend the party's leading role.

Studying Society: From Class Antagonism to Social Diversity

The tradition of interwar sociology was abruptly severed in the aftermath of the 1948 coup, with its analysis of social stratification supplanted by historical materialism or orthodox Marxism, characterised by deductive and theory-driven reasoning. However, the social and economic challenges faced by communist regimes in the following decade led to calls for greater involvement of social science research to support the official

23 JIŘÍ HOPPE, *Radovan Richta a mezioborový tým pro výzkum společenských a lidských souvislostí vědeckotechnické revoluce: Proč a jak vznikla Civilizace na rozcestí* [*Radovan Richta and the Interdisciplinary team for Research on the Social and Human Context of the Scientific and Technological Revolution*], in: O nový československý model socialismu, (eds.) Jiří Hoppe, Markéta Škodová, Jiří Suk, Francesco Caccamo, p. 76.

24 LADISLAV TOMÁŠEK, *Strana a dnešek* [*The Party and Today*], Praha 1967, p. 16.

policies of socialist states.[25] In this atmosphere of gradual and strictly controlled liberalisation, Czechoslovak sociology experienced a revival in the mid-1960s. This resurgence emphasised empirical research and also relied on the supply of literature from both neighbouring Poland and Western academia. Within this sociological renaissance, the team around Pavel Machonin studying the social structure of Czechoslovak society was the most prominent. The project resulted in two significant monographs: the preparatory book *The Social Structure of Socialist Society* (*Sociální struktura socialistické společnosti*), first published in 1966, whose abbreviated version served as working material for the XIII. Communist Party Congress,[26] and later *Czechoslovak Society* (*Československá společnost*), which was finalised and partly presented in 1968 but barely got published in 1969.

The language of 1960s sociology diverged significantly from the entrenched language of the official ideology. As Communist rule and the theoretical dominance of historical materialism made it impossible to pick up the threads of a preceding sociological tradition,[27] sociologists opened themselves to modern intellectual influences outside of Marxist theory, such as structural functionalism. The official backing notwithstanding, sociology introduced a novel intellectual impulse. The detailed study of the contemporary social structure led Machonin's team to a more critical attitude.[28] This was especially apparent in the open rejection of Marxist reductionism, which reduced all social tensions to symptoms of class struggle.[29] This departure was present already in their research premises, as the study of social stratification implied a more diverse and gradual view of social differentiation. Still, these premises remained aligned with the regime line claiming that class struggle was being replaced by class

25 MICHAEL VOŘÍŠEK, *Česká sociologie šedesátých let* [*Czech Sociology of the 1960s*], in: Dějiny české sociologie, (ed.) Zdeněk Nešpor, Praha 2014, pp. 323–324.

26 MICHAEL VOŘÍŠEK, *Pavel Machonin a výzkum sociální struktury* [*Pavel Machonin and Social Structure Research*], in: Dějiny české sociologie, (ed.) Zdeněk Nešpor, Praha 2014, pp. 397–398.

27 MICHAEL VOŘÍŠEK, *Reform Generation,* Praha 2012, pp. 44–45.

28 JIŘÍ MUSIL, *Poznámky o české sociologii za komunistického režimu* [*Notes on Czech Sociology Under the Communist Regime*], Sociologický časopis 40/2004, no. 5, p. 583.

29 PAVEL MACHONIN, *Konceptuální rámec a základní teoretické předpoklady výzkumu sociální stratifikace* [*Conceptual Framework and Basic Theoretical Assumptions of Social Stratification Research*], in: Československá společnost, (ed.) Pavel Machonin, Bratislava 1969, p. 19.

rapprochement, which only underscored the need for new approaches to grasp the complexities of a more advanced socialist society.

While Czechoslovak society was understood to consist of non-antagonistic relations, this did not signify the elimination of social contradictions or differentiation altogether. On the contrary, the sociologists of the 1960s based their research on multiple differentiating factors. Initially, the research team worked with up to eleven criteria, but the final study settled on five main factors: the complexity of work, lifestyle outside of work, education and qualification, standard of living or income, and participation in management.[30] With this variety of differentiating factors, Czechoslovak society now appeared more complex and diversely stratified. Most notably, classes were no longer perceived as homogenous strata but as internally diverse bodies regarding their interests and actions.[31] This understanding of social actors as simultaneously non-antagonist and diverse clashed with earlier conceptions of social stratification under socialism, such as Stalin's theory of the intensification of class struggle, where the continuing progress of society necessitated conflict with the remnants of the pre-socialist regime.[32] Sociologists saw this interpretation of social development as a defensive move by conservative forces that impeded the progressive direction of the country by focusing solely on the class axis of the political conflict.[33] The class-based divisions were not seen as decisive in power-sharing either. This culminated in a later attack on Stalin and his scheme of social stratification, which portrayed society as divided into the working class as the ruling class, peasants as subordinate allies, and intelligentsia as a mere service stratum.[34] Drawing attention to the higher status characteristics of the working intelligentsia

30 P. MACHONIN, *Konceptuální rámec a základní teoretické předpoklady výzkumu sociální stratifikace*, pp. 29–30.

31 PAVEL MACHONIN, *K celkové charakteristice sociální struktury v socialistické společnosti* [*On the Overall Characteristics of the Social Structure in Socialist Society*], in: Sociální struktura československé společnosti, (ed.) Pavel Machonin, Praha 1967, pp. 138–139.

32 MIROSLAV PETRUSEK, *Stalinova verze marxismu a jeho 'ortodoxní model'. Dějiny VKS(b) po pětasedmdesáti letech: kapitola z historické sociologie* [*Stalin's Version of Marxism and His 'Orthodox Model'*], Historická sociologie 5/2013, no. 1, p. 45.

33 P. MACHONIN, *K celkové charakteristice sociální struktury v socialistické společnosti*, p. 111.

34 PAVEL MACHONIN, *Sociální stratifikace v Československu 1967* [*Social Stratification in Czechoslovakia 1967*], in: Československá společnost, (ed.) Pavel Machonin, Bratislava 1968, p. 106.

and the enduring lack of participation in the ruling of socialist society, Machonin rejected this scheme as an "ideological construction that reflects reality upside down."[35]

His team repeatedly emphasised the Marxist credentials of his project and proposals, for example, by referencing Lenin's claim that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production is only the first step to the abolition of classes.[36] Nevertheless, while advocating for a classless society, the team did not call for erasing differences but rather for intensifying them to accelerate the new social phase. The two books offered slightly different visions of future development: the first one proposed a classless communist society with socialism as only its first phase, while the second advanced both more radical and realist visions of democratic socialism. Nonetheless, both works shared an emphasis on scientific and technological revolution. Significant differences, however, existed between the perspectives of Machonin and Richta. Although both saw the scientific and technological revolution as a goal of social progress, Machonin was more sceptical, warning that such forecasts may "lose the character of scientific prognosis and gain the character of 'prophecy.'"[37] Sociology, respecting the boundaries of empirically verifiable research and hypothesis, viewed this development not as a question of historical necessity but rather as a possibility that was dependent on further changes in the social structure and participation of the progressive forces of the society.

This view implicitly brought sociologists closer to the party's reformist leadership, as both groups believed that the positive development of socialist society depended on necessary reforms. Machonin's team repeatedly emphasised that the most important axis of socialist differentiation lay in the complexity of work and work qualifications.[38] For the sociologists, the communist regime's promise of an equal society

35 P. MACHONIN, *Sociální stratifikace v Československu 1967*, p. 107.

36 GRIGORIJ GLEZERMAN, *Historický materialismus a analýza sociální struktury socialistické společnosti* [*Historical Materialism and the Analysis of the Social Structure of Socialist Society*], in: Sociální struktura československé společnosti, (ed.) Pavel Machonin, Praha 1967, p. 172.

37 PAVEL MACHONIN, BOHUMIL JUNGMANN, *Vědeckotechnický pohyb a náš soudobý sociální systém* [*The Scientific and Technological Movement and Our Contemporary Social System*], Sociologický časopis 4/1968, no. 4, p. 429.

38 P. MACHONIN, *Změny v sociální struktuře Československa a dynamika sociálně politického vývoje [Changes in the Social Structure of Czechoslovakia and the Dynamics of Sociopolitical Development]*, Praha 1967, p. 90.

had culminated in untenable egalitarian conditions, including an overt nivelisation of income that impeded both adequate remuneration for qualified work and further progress.[39] The offered solution thus consisted of denivelisation of income, valorisation of work performance, and increased qualification of workers.[40] While qualified and intellectual work served as a point of convergence between more advanced workers and parts of the intelligentsia – viewed as progressive social forces – unqualified workers and excessive nivelisation were seen as key support of the conservative and bureaucratic parts of the Communist regime.[41] The deepening of social differentiation was not supposed to thwart the goal of achieving social unity. On the contrary, these terms were seen as complementary and interlinked in a dialectical process. While the contradictions or differences might initially seem to disrupt social unity, they were supposedly meant to reveal the diversity inherent in socialist society. Since Czechoslovakia had proclaimed itself to be an all-people state rather than a dictatorship of the proletariat closely aligned with a single social interest, it had to achieve a higher type of unity that encompassed various differences and interests.[42] Instead of having the party leadership directly dictate social interests, these interests were supposed to emerge from the variety of social groups.

Despite this focus on the plurality and internal diversification of social actors, the working class continued to play a central role in progressive advances, albeit in a different form. Progressive forces were still defined according to their objective position within the production process. However, the transformation of the production process also shifted the locus of these forces. This time, it was not the working class per se, but rather its more qualified segment that began to align more closely with the working intelligentsia. This further differentiation within the

39 However, these claims remained, to a certain extent, on the level of assumptions, which were not supported by the resulting form of social stratification. See M. VOŘÍŠEK, *Pavel Machonin a výzkum sociální struktury*, p. 401.

40 P. MACHONIN, B. JUNGMANN, *Vědeckotechnický pohyb a náš soudobý sociální systém*, p. 438.

41 M. VOŘÍŠEK, *Česká sociologie šedesátých let*, p. 329.

42 P. MACHONIN, *K celkové charakteristice sociální struktury v socialistické společnosti*, p. 140. For a similar argument, see ZDENĚK MLYNÁŘ, VÁCLAV PAVLÍČEK, *Politická organizace ve vztahu k vývoji sociální struktury socialistické společnosti* [*Political Organization in Relation to the Development of the Social Structure of Socialist Society*], in: Sociální struktura československé společnosti, (ed.) Pavel Machonin, Praha 1967, pp. 656–657.

working class led to the discovery of the "progressive core" that was expected to fulfil the leading role of political development while the intelligentsia would be aligned with the advances of the upcoming scientific and technological revolution.[43] However, the basis for identifying this "progressive core" shifted from economic position alone to a combination of qualification, effectiveness, and political engagement, "regardless of which of the traditional social categories they belong to."[44] While the criterion of qualification was not missing, the quoted conclusion points to the possibility that the position in the economic system was no longer sufficient to determine the bearers of progress.

Even accounting for possible biases, Machonin's team remained in the field of empirical science. In these moments, however, their work approached the level of political recommendations, suggesting possible progressive coalitions. These practical outputs represented a radical departure from the Marxist orthodoxy. In 1968, this research was popularised in the party's theoretical journal *New Mind* (*Nová mysl*), aligning with the goals of reformist policies.[45] The radicality of these recommendations was most evident in their implications for the role of the Communist Party. Given the inner diversification of social groups and the changing pathways of social progress, the party could no longer present itself solely as the representative of a homogenous working class whose interest determined progressive social development. Rather, it had to construct broader alliances with new "progressive forces" now seen as the real "social avant-garde," while the role of the party was becoming

43 P. MACHONIN, *K celkové charakteristice sociální struktury v socialistické společnosti*, p. 150.

44 P. MACHONIN, B. JUNGMANN, *Vědeckotechnický pohyb a náš soudobý sociální systém*, p. 439.

45 For example, the article authored by Bohumil Šimon presented the standard of living as a pressing political issue. In May, Stanislav Provazník explained the relevance of the Action Programme by its response to the changing social structure, emphasising the diversity of social interests and the necessity of the denivelisation of income. Machonin's article on social stratification presented some arguments from the book *Československá společnost* that would be published in 1969, long after the premature end of the reform process. See BOHUMIL ŠIMON, *Životní úroveň* [*Standard of Living*], Nová mysl 22/1968, no. 1, pp. 34–45; STANISLAV PROVAZNÍK, *Akční program a sociální zájmy* [*Action Programme and Social Interests*], Nová mysl 22/1968, no. 5, pp. 561–568.; P. MACHONIN, *Sociální rozvrstvení naší společnosti* [*The Social Stratification of Our Society*], Nová mysl 22/1968, no. 4, pp. 466–474.

more organisational.[46] If the party wanted to uphold the progressive direction of society, it would need to redefine not only the social groups that were the bearers of such direction but also its hierarchical relation to them.

Living the Socialist Society: Unfulfilled Demands and Resentment

Based on sociological research, the CPCz had a chance to position itself within the diverse socialist society and its emerging social groups. Until late 1967, there appeared to be no rush in defining the party's role. In the words of Vladimir Kusin:

> "In 1967 Czechoslovakia was not on the verge of collapse, economically or otherwise. The reformers were not prompted into action by imminent doom, although in some fields relations had been near breaking point. [...] Reform theories [...] were formulated as an alternative national aim of a long-term nature rather than as a plan for an immediate rescue operation."[47]

This situation changed dramatically with the 1968 events, which burst into the otherwise peaceful process of understanding the driving forces behind the societal change and formulating the party's long-term aims. A significant catalyst was the public's growing dissatisfaction with the CPCz expressed by people in public after the censorship was lifted. The glimpses of discontent with the everyday experience of daily life in a socialist society – ranging from unsatisfactory working and living conditions to shortages and restrictions on intellectual and political freedom – had manifested publicly even in previous years. In his recently published monograph, Jakub Šlouf has compellingly recounted the evolution of the "culture of protest," mainly (yet not exclusively) among industrial workers, from the late 1940s to the late 1960s.[48] Šlouf contends that (similarly to the 1951–1953 strikes) protests that took place between 1962 and 1967 merged social issues with political ones as they exhibited

46 See P. MACHONIN, *Sociální rozvrstvení naší společnosti*, p. 474; P. MACHONIN, *Nová jednota společnosti* [*The New Unity of Society*], Rudé právo 48/1968, no. 66, p. 3; M. VOŘÍŠEK, *Reform Generation*, pp. 231–232.

47 VLADIMIR V. KUSIN, *Political Grouping in the Czechoslovak Reform Movement*, New York 1972, p. 2.

48 J. ŠLOUF, „*Takový socialismus nechceme!*".

both a critique of social conditions and "more conceptual political demands."[49] The year 1967 additionally bore witness to two major protest events. First, the defiance of more than a handful of intellectuals at the IV. Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in June, and second, the student protests (violently suppressed by the police) sparked by the living conditions in the Strahov dormitories at the end of October. The re-evaluation of these two events after January 1968 aroused new hope among people whose demands had been neglected or suppressed.

The scope and sources of discontent were well observable when people had a chance to express their expectations regarding the awaited publication of the Action Programme. Their responses attested to the widespread sense of unfulfilled lived experience within a socialist society under the CPCz leadership. When asked, "What do you expect from the Action Programme?" the workers and the higher-ups of the Aritma factory in Vokovice gave the TV reporters answers such as:[50]

> "I would expect an improvement for women. Especially in the factories regarding the work shifts, I'd say that [as] the women working here, we would indeed need to be relieved of some burden both at work and at home with the family."

> "The first thing I'd expect from the Action Programme of the Central Committee is that the comrades would openly tell us what the state of our national economy today was and when it would reach a point that we could say that the living standard is on the rise instead of declining. [...] The comrades should properly consider the living standard of the working people: consider the young and the old leaving for retirement. [...] Regarding the state of our national economy now, would there be, let's say, in five years something left to pay the rent for the retiring workers? And young people entering marriage should be given a guarantee that they will have a chance to raise children in some environment."

Or:

> "We expect [...] some positives for the workers because so far it was a lot of talk but not much action."

49 Šlouf identifies the difference between protests in the early 1950s and the 1960s, in that while in the 1950s, the protests started in factories, in the 1960s, they were initiated mainly by students (e.g. around the time of the May Day celebrations). With this shift, he also notices a spillover from social topics to political issues. J. ŠLOUF, *„Takový socialismus nechceme!"*, p. 226.

50 *Příloha televizních novin, Anketa k akčnímu programu* [*TV Newspaper Supplement, Survey on the Action Programme*] www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/12030196645-priloha-televiznich-novin/26853109872/ (accessed 23. September 2024).

Some workers called for a return to the (unspecified) ideas that had still not been implemented even after twenty years.

> "Basically, that we will return to the ideas that were already articulated in 1945 and that the huge initiative of the people back then, the same that was released today, will help us to implement the ideas of the party."

The higher-ups then voiced their desire for factories to have more liberty and less surveillance, for mobilising party members and every citizen, and for imposing higher requirements on communists in any position of power.

The range of expectations – both simple and more abstract – that people voiced was vast. The callback to 1945 reinforces the impression that, despite declarations of entering a new stage of development, many old promises remained unfulfilled. Hereby, we move toward the main issue, that is, the discontent arising from unfulfilled demands across society and its classes, and the perception of the party's policies as the origins of this discontent. The category of a "demand" is a starting point in Laclau's discourse theory, describing the circumstances of the constitution of a broader political subjectivity (such as "the People") against a political regime. Laclau cogently described where it might lead once people's diverse but unmet demands found a common denominator:

> "If the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from the others), and an equivalential relation is established between them. The result could easily be, if it is not circumvented by external factors, a widening chasm separating the institutional system from the people."[51]

Ample evidence of lingering dissatisfaction flared up in 1968, from sentiments expressed in public gatherings to articles and essays in the press. In his article *Time of Accountability (Čas odpovědnosti)* published by *New Mind* in March, Jan Fojtík captured this atmosphere with the opening question: "How to explain the increasing discontent and how to characterize this discontent accurately?"[52] The overt discontent seemed even more paradoxical, emerging at a time when the party appeared to be

51 ERNESTO LACLAU, *On Populist Reason*, London–New York 2005, pp. 73–74.
52 JAN FOJTÍK, *Čas odpovědnosti* [*Time of Accountability*], Nová mysl 22/1968, no. 3, p. 275.

seriously addressing its past while also focusing on pressing current issues. Fojtík attributed this discontent to the prevailing tension between people's images of their lives and desires on the one hand and their lived reality on the other. He then continued by stating that the light shed on political leadership in those days enhanced the inadequacy with which it approached the needs of a non-capitalist society and was unable to satisfy them. As a result, there was an increased tension between the "progressive demands of the contemporary stage of the development of our society and adequacy of politics to answer these demands."[53] The initial doubts and indecisiveness of the political elite after the January Central Committee's meeting – combined with the sense that some measures were taken merely to appease the demands or to paralyse their further expression – only fuelled the distrust of the people.[54]

These accounts testify that, even after twenty years of living under the CPCz's leadership and after the last eight years of living in a proclaimed socialist society, the needs of many people were not met – at least not to the extent that was promised by the proclamations of the political elite. Eva Illouz argues that such conditions – a strong normative equality discourse combined with a sense of powerlessness – create fertile ground for resentment to flourish. This sense of the loss of power can then instigate an eagerness for revenge against the perceived perpetrator. This resentment, as Illouz argues, can be channelled and used in a political arena and even change its initial direction.[55] The negative emotions of early 1968 were clearly directed at the people in positions of power in society, as seen in citizens' calls for their resignations – including that of President Antonín Novotný. This constellation could have seriously troubled the party's aims at defining its leading role. If the political elite were to prevent the course of resentment toward the CPCz as a leading

53 J. FOJTÍK, *Čas odpovědnosti*, p. 276.

54 J. FOJTÍK, *Čas odpovědnosti*, pp. 276–277.

55 EVA ILLOUZ, *The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy*, Cambridge 2023, pp. 93–94. It should be noted that Illouz deems resentment "a key emotional idiom of capitalist democracies" precisely because of the discrepancy between lived experience and the norms of equality and counts it, thus, as one of the driving emotions of contemporary populism. Yet, at the same time, she argues, contrary to some of her predecessors who study resentment, that resentment is not "historically fixed." See E. ILLOUZ, *The Emotional Life of Populism,* pp. 93–94.

force in society, it was urged to adopt a strategy that would help to defend its position.

The final section of this paper thus delves into rhetorical strategies applied by the political elite to defend the CPCz's leading role, particularly examining the use of the terms "unity" and "trust." In this final section, we explore the kind of political articulation where a particular actor assumes a provisionally universal position, representing the social whole. In the past, this position belonged to both the party and the working class based on the premises of historical materialism. By 1968, however, the position had to be rearticulated by reformist elites on new grounds, as the vanishing of class struggle and the diversification of society – disclosed by the sociologists' research and public discontent – situated the party in a new social context. The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, capturing the constitution of political identities and relations as a result of various signifying practices, offers a promising perspective. Sociological research into social structure and civic attitudes from 1966 to 1968 revealed complex political identities and divisions that could no longer be fully contained in the scheme of class struggle. Consequently, discursive intervention by the reformist elite was both possible and necessary to safeguard the leading role of the party.

1968: Between Hegemonic Strategy and Maintaining the Status Quo

The October meeting of the Central Committee is widely regarded as the start of the intra-party crisis that resulted in the removal of Antonín Novotný from the office of the First Secretary of the CPCz in January 1968. However, Alexander Dubček's speech, which sparked a bad-tempered reaction from Novotný over the issue of nationalism, was actually delivered on the scheduled topic of that day: *The Position and Role of the Party in the Current Stage of Development of Our Socialist Society* (*Postavení a úloha strany v současné etapě vývoje naší socialistické společnosti*). As the topic suggested, the role of the party was redefined with special attention to the evolving terrain of Czechoslovak society. While the process of class rapprochement had already been discussed in previous years, Dubček was more radical and definitive in his description of the "qualitatively new situation of our development," stating, "... inside the society, the class struggle has stopped operating as the main

moving force of social development, and the decisive process is (now) class rapprochement, which will be finalized by creating a classless society."[56] The challenging climate of the political environment was only exacerbated as 1968 progressed. Following Novotný's replacement by Dubček in the office of the Party's First Secretary in January, the loosening of the country's political atmosphere resulted in the increase of the public initiative of Czechoslovak citizens, which quickly caught the attention of the Party's Central Committee.[57] While this development was unprecedented, Communist leaders sought to transform public mobilisation and the corresponding proliferation of diverse social interests into support for the reformist direction so that the party could still serve as the leading and integrating political force. Nevertheless, given the diverse social terrain described by Machonin's team, the party could secure its leading role only as a hegemon within a broader coalition of progressive forces.

In the course of their genealogical exploration of the concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe consider the Leninist conception of hegemony, which consists of class alliance under political leadership, usually of the Communist Party. Laclau and Mouffe disclose the authoritarian potential inherent in this conception of hegemony, as it may lead to hierarchical relations within the class alliance, distinguishing between the leaded masses and their leaders, i.e. the party as a vanguard. However, they also mention its democratic potential unleashed by the simultaneous presence of multiple lines of political antagonisms.[58] Since the Marxist-Leninist principles served as a frame of reference even after January 1968, it is possible to analyse the discourse of reformist leaders regarding the process of class rapprochement and alliance concerning these two poles.[59]

56 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1. Komunistická strana Československa. Pokus o reformu. Říjen 1967–květen 1968* [*Sources on the history of the Czechoslovak crisis in 1967–1970, volume IX/1. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia: An Attempt at Reform, October 1967–May 1968*], (eds.) JITKA VONDROVÁ, JAROMÍR NAVRÁTIL, JAN MORAVEC, Praha–Brno 1999, document no. 2, p. 25.

57 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 22, p. 132.

58 E. LACLAU, CH. MOUFFE. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 55.

59 The designation of these tendencies as explicitly democratic and authoritarian is dependent on the normative presuppositions of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, such as radical democratic valorisation of indeterminate political

The democratic potential of class alliances lies in the multiplication of antagonisms transcending class identities determined by a particular economic system. The identities of social actors are no longer derived from their economically determined positions but become a political effect of hegemonic articulation.[60] In 1968, after abandoning the perspective of class struggle, Dubček argued that the role of the party is to "open the space for the activity of all social groups of our society"[61] while forsaking overtly centralistic practices. The term "vanguard" here signified that the party did not obstruct progressive development or particular demands but rather helped organise them.[62] Similarly, Josef Smrkovský demanded a broader vision of politics in which the "representatives of our party cannot act as representatives of only one class and one party, but (must) act as politicians representing and expressing the interests of our whole society."[63] While the party moved toward a more open and integrative socialist democracy, this orientation was limited by its continued allegiance to the Communist doctrine and by the need to control social development.

Contrary to the democratic potential of hegemony identified by Laclau and Mouffe in the opening of the social conflict across multiple antagonistic lines, the authoritarian tendencies dwelled in reducing identities to those determined by pre-political class interests. The hegemonic position of the working class relies on its proximity to the most progressive aspects of a particular mode of production. However, since no class wholly follows its proper interest, the epistemologically privileged vanguard party must locate its genuine identity and historical aims.[64]

In 1968, the party tried to retain its vanguardist role by containing social development within the limits of its progressive line. Although various social interests may have served as the starting point, the party remained the arbiter of their compatibility with the general interests

identities. While this part follows Laclau and Mouffe's exposition in using these terms, the following analysis of the reformist discourse withdraws from such strong normative assertions, referring instead to more open-ended or inclusive rhetorical strategies on one side, and controlling ones on the other.

60 E. LACLAU, CH. MOUFFE. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 58.

61 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 9, p. 63.

62 See *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 9, p. 63; document no. 36, p. 270.

63 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 36, p. 271.

64 E. LACLAU, CH. MOUFFE, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 59.

of society.[65] Following Radovan Richta's recommendation[66] during the Central Committee's discussions, Dubček's assertion of radicality seemed rather a strategic plan to maintain control over the development: "We must strive to manage social interests that take place in society. It is therefore desirable to focus on progressive demands – even if they may initially seem too radical – to keep up with this process, so the party remains at the forefront."[67]

Unity

This tension between the open-ended and controlling strategies of the reformist politicians is pertinent in the use of the figure of unity. As Petr Andreas shows, the replacement of Novotný by Dubček marked a shift from the discourse of the enemy to the discourse of unity. With the decreasing role of the class struggle, the enemy was located in the conservative forces that represented an obstacle to the progressive development of society.[68] Since the January resolution of the Central Committee, the party's goal was the "unification of all our people for securing the tasks of future development of an advanced socialist society."[69] Facing the increased diversification of society and the proliferation of various social demands, the Action Programme proposed the politics of unity as one of its main principles, calling for the unity of various classes and groups within Czechoslovakia.

As Laclau and Mouffe claim, such "Communist enumeration is not the confirmation of a de facto situation but has a performative character. The unity of an ensemble of sectors is not a datum: it is a project to be

65 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 34, p. 241.

66 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 27, p. 194.

67 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 34, p. 258.

68 P. ANDREAS, *Není stále jasné, co jsou to protisocialistické síly*, pp. 193–194. This integrationist discourse, however, did not endure the whole period of the Prague Spring. Starting in June, reformist politicians became more opposed to "anti-socialist forces," comprising both the conservative opponents of the reform project and the "anti-socialist right." See P. ANDREAS, *Není stále jasné, co jsou to protisocialistické síly*, pp. 199–210.

69 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 4, p. 40.

built politically."[70] Reformist leaders thus aimed to construct a broader political subjectivity, transcending class boundaries by connecting various social strata against a shared "enemy" and, more importantly, uniting them around a shared goal: a more advanced and democratic version of socialism. While the inclusive vocabulary of reformists often invoked the people instead of the working class, this effort to construct a new political subjectivity is most present in the figure of unity.

The constitution of political subjectivity was further elaborated in Laclau's later texts on populism, where the category of the People simultaneously represents and constitutes the invoked collective identity. In this framework, the hegemonic operation is necessarily rhetorical, as rhetoric "brings objective reality into existence by imposing on an array of heterogeneous elements the semblance of a structure within which they acquire identity/meaning."[71] The performativity of rhetorics is most apparent in the trope of catachresis, i.e. a process where a name is given to that which lacked its proper name, or, in other words, where the absence of a corresponding literal term must be supplanted by the figurative use of language. For Laclau, this naming of a non-existent yet necessary object or group has a clear affinity with the hegemonic constitution of political subjectivity.[72]

Faced with the proliferation of demands and interests, reformists sought to integrate them within a broad socialist project. The term "unity" was used to address social diversity and even disintegration, which, as in the case of Machonin's team, were seen as inevitable stages.[73] Social unity had to be understood dialectically, as Dubček asserted in his April speech, noting, "We must respect the increase of differentiation and realize unity through the exercise of specific interests."[74] The reformist discourse continued to portray the working class as the pivotal revolutionary actor, stating that it "has the biggest social and political interest in the

70 E. LACLAU, CH. MOUFFE, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 64.
71 MICHAEL KAPLAN, *The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes*, Philosophy & Rhetoric 43/2010, no. 3, p. 258.
72 E. LACLAU, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005, p. 72.
73 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 36, p. 270.
74 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 34, p. 240.

next all-encompassing development of our society."[75] This aligns with Laclau and Mouffe's observation that Communist efforts to construct a broader political subjectivity were often accompanied by an effort to keep a class identity at the centre of this unity. Again, this was possible in two directions: either by the postulation of an essential core of a working class that ontologically (or in this sense, economically) posited it as the most progressive actor or by a refusal of this fundamental essence, where the unity between social agents and the hegemonic position of the working class is an effect of political initiative in the articulation of these relations.[76] In the reformist discourse, both operations coexisted. The privileged position and revolutionary nature of the working class were often simply assumed.[77] However, this rather essentialist position was frequently supplanted by a more inclusive framework where the progressive support of the party was located in all contributing forces of society, provided they "will be conscious of mutual responsibility and won't prefer their narrow estate interest."[78] The discourse of reformist leaders, up to the publication of the Action Programme, thus balanced between progressive and traditional elements, supporting societal mobilisation and the proliferation of multiple interests while simultaneously relying on the vanguard position of the party and the privileged position of the working class to curb this process.

Trust

Unlike the term "unity," which has been reused over the years, the term "trust" occurred rather as a novelty in the discourse of the political elite.

75 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 34, p. 239.

76 E. LACLAU, CH. MOUFFE. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 65.

77 The effort to locate a progressive core in the working class by non-political determinations was more present in the theory of the "progressive core" of Machonin's team. This core was often identified with the technologically advanced workers, as they were the most associated with the technological progress of society. While this moment was absent from the speeches or internal debates, it was part of the Party-authorised intellectual discussion on the pages of *Nová mysl*. See ZDENĚK VALENTA, *Dělnická třída a inteligence* [*The Working Class and the Intelligentsia*], Nová mysl 22/1968, no. 2, p. 210.

78 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 50, p. 325.

If the party's role was guaranteed by its vanguardist position in the revolutionary struggle, there was no need to seek people's trust beyond that historical determination. Yet, once the discourse of revolutionary struggle was renounced, any signs of distrust from society toward the CPCz's authority might have made its position more fragile. In 1968, this distrust, interwoven with public expressions of discontent, presented an obstacle to the unifying efforts of the party. On February 27, it became a central topic for Jiří Hanzelka's article in the newspaper Young Front (*Mladá fronta*), compellingly titled *The Crossroads of Trust* (*Rozcestí důvěry*). As the title suggests, Hanzelka emphasised the "crisis of trust" that had "grown into a crisis in every area of public life."[79] Hanzelka expressed his wish that the crossroads where the party and all the people in Czechoslovakia stood would lead to "real democracy" and "real socialism," which could be achieved only if "words matched actions."[80] According to Hanzelka, the reason for the fading trust in CPCz's leadership dwelled in the dissonance between the proclamation of the political elite and people's real-life experience under the party's rule.

> "Trust began to crumble where the contradiction between word and deed, between theory and practice, became the rule. Argumentation lost its persuasiveness when the word of the statesman, the educator, and the propagandist began to diverge from the truth, from the everyday experience of the citizens of this state."[81]

This disposition, marked by people's distrust, affected the discussions in the highest party echelon, which pondered the grounds on which the leading role of the CPCz should be based and how it should be presented to the people. The resolution proposal for the Presidium meeting on the political situation from March 11 foreshadowed that its members sought to move very cautiously regarding the conception of the leading role, specifically how to grasp it in the Action Programme:

> "It is necessary to consider with the utmost responsibility if it is possible to release this program as a party program for the whole of society. That would be a contin-

79 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 11. Komunistická strana Československa. Pražské jaro v médiích: výběr z dobové publicistiky* [*Sources on the History of the Czechoslovak Crisis in 1967–1970, volume 11. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia: The Prague Spring in the Media – A Selection of Period Journalism*], (ed.) JIŘÍ HOPPE, Praha–Brno 2004, document no. 9, p. 52.

80 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 11*, document no. 9, p. 52.

81 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 11*, document no. 9, p. 51.

> uation of the incorrect conception of the party's leading role based on the party's direct imposition of tasks to all of the organizations. It is necessary to choose such a form that would correctly implement and restore the leading role of the party and simultaneously bolster the role of the National Assembly, government, Slovak national organs, and social organizations."[82]

The generally advocated shift from "managing" (*řízení*) to "leading" (*vedení*) was described, in their own words, as a "hegemony," since the party leadership was "based not on power dominance but on a constant renewal of trust and authority."[83] It was uncanny how, in 1968, the party, which for many years had imposed directives on society, proclaimed to rely on the people's trust. As these excerpts indicate, similarly to the term "unity" – used both to boost progressive tendencies and hold onto some continuum with more traditional essentialist positions – "trust" served a dual purpose. On the one hand, its addition to the rhetoric helped break with the status quo defined by the unquestionable imposition of the party's politics (an "incorrect conception of the leading role") and corroborated the sense of entering into a new era. Even if, a few years prior, the CPCz faced criticism, it was always restrained, and the party had never previously exposed itself to this abundant expression of distrust. Opening the party to overt criticism and acknowledging people's distrust toward the political elite as valid thus marked a radical departure from the established order. This constellation, a state of depravity where people had no authority to invest their trust, created fertile ground for establishing hegemony. For hegemony, according to Laclau, needs to offer a sense of completion to fulfil the void and sense of lack:

> "I understand by 'hegemony' a relationship by which a particular content assumes, in a certain context, the function of incarnating an absent fullness. For instance, in a society suffering deep social disorganization, 'order' can be seen as the positive reverse of a situation of generalized *anomie*. The initial situation, to which 'order' is opposed, is the experience of deprivation, finitude, and facticity. Now, once this experience takes place at different points within the social fabric, all of them will be lived as equivalent to each other, since, beyond their differences, all of them will point to a common situation of dislocation and incompletion."[84]

82 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 30, p. 136.

83 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 30, p. 208.

84 ERNESTO LACLAU, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London–New York 2014, pp. 48–49.

Under these circumstances, however, there was no guarantee that the particular experiences of depravity, once united by commonly shared feelings of distrust, would prevent people from turning against the party and challenging its leadership. The CPCz had offered a panacea to this situation, which, on the other hand, did not seem as radical, as it continued to safeguard its leading role. The political subjectivity that the reformist leaders tried to construct thus had its limits. Their rhetoric maintained that the party should be entrusted with authority because people's unfulfilled demands could be satisfied only within the institutional (reformed) framework with the CPCz as a leading force.

The term "trust" served this dual purpose in the Action Programme, a document meant to shape political discourse in the near future. Upon its release on April 5, the core theses of what was intended to become the most important document of that era were repeatedly criticised as "outdated" for failing to reflect society's dynamics and people's demands. Concerns about this were raised among members of the political elite as early as February. At the Presidium meeting, Martin Vaculík emphasised: "If we want to call it the Action Programme, we need to include more action things in there. I mean action for people. [...] If we want to release something as an action program, if we want people to support us, we must make it clear to the people."[85] Even if opinions among the members of the political elite on both the questions that should be worked on and the degree of people's activity that was desired may have diverged, the yearning for people's support in the CPCz's project was evident, and the eagerness to rebuild the trust in the CPCz in the new era permeated the document. Trust was introduced as an essential component of the newly established and unified socialist society. Its significance is evident in the fact that, together with the figure of unity, "trust" made its way into the title of one of the program's sections – *"Politics of Unity and Trust"* (*"Politika jednoty a důvěry"*). Trust was intended to strengthen the relationship between the people and the party with institutions, and among the diverse strata and nations of socialist society, thereby forming the foundation for unity.

The purpose of today's politics is to form and constantly renew democratic relations of cooperation and trust between social groups without distinction, to bring their efforts together, to unite their forces on the

85 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 14, p. 86.

basis of the socialist development of the whole society.[86] This emphasis on trust and support was eventually reflected even in the conception of the party's leading role, which was no longer predetermined. The Action Programme described it as follows:

> "The Communist Party relies on the voluntary support of the people; it does not exercise its leading role by ruling over society [...]. It cannot force its authority but must constantly win it by its actions."[87]

Through this specific political articulation, the party tapped into the void – of the absence of trust in the political elite and institutions – while offering people a place to put their trust into, i.e. in a reformed CPCz leadership based on continuously earning people's support rather than enforcing dominance. This, however, is an example of an articulation that attests to the CPCz's reluctance to abandon the established status quo and pursue hegemony. The grounds for fully embracing the hegemonic strategy seemed quite uncertain, as the party was viewed as a perpetrator of many people's unsatisfactory lived experiences because of how it had "ruled over society" for the previous twenty years. The party, therefore, did not intend to "win" support by submitting its authority to the will of the people in competitive elections anytime soon. By winning support through "actions," the party committed to fulfilling particular demands without seeking to establish a new order where its authority would be challenged. To gain trust in its politics, the party considered the mundane aspects of people's lives in the form of housing policies, modernisation of living and working conditions, and cultural amenities. The CPCz pledged to improve these aspects, especially with the youth in mind and the prospect of the "rigorous elimination of everything that causes the youth to distrust socialism."[88]

As mentioned above, establishing a new hegemony, in Laclau's terms, requires that all unfulfilling experiences be "lived as equivalent to each other, since, beyond their differences, all of them will point to a common situation of dislocation and incompletion."[89] These experiences

86 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 50, p. 324.

87 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 50, p. 326.

88 *Prameny k dějinám československé krize 1967–1970, vol. 9/1*, document no. 50, pp. 327–328.

89 E. LACLAU, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, p. 49.

can be united only if someone claims to represent them in their totality, which throws the regime into a situation of dislocation. Laclau, therefore, makes a distinction between democratic and popular demands. The former type of demands is articulated as particular and differentiated demands connected only by a vague sense of solidarity; they could be satisfied within the system and do not call for its breakdown. The latter type, while still defined by the heterogeneity of the demands, presupposes that the demands unite in a chain of equivalences upon agreeing that the current regime cannot satisfy them and that the status quo is untenable. As a consequence, the united people start to demand a new order. In 1968, the party thus found itself balancing on the edge between pursuing a new hegemony and maintaining the status quo defined by the CPCz's leading role. It vacillated between maintaining differentiated demands to prevent the regime's crisis, while at the same time positioning itself as the only leading force capable of representing the newly forming political unity. As a result, the conception of the leading role was approached differently; it was no longer historically determined, but rather defended based on unity and trust as essential components of politics at the time. Like the figure "unity," the term "trust" helped the political elite evoke a sense of radical departure from the status quo. On the other hand, despite the support that the party pleaded for, it was meant to safeguard its leading role.

Conclusion

In 1968, the CPCz continued to reassess its role in a self-proclaimed socialist society. To uncover the fabric of this society – no longer defined by class struggle as capitalist ones were – the party, throughout the 1960s, fostered expert knowledge meant to provide a better understanding of society's internal driving forces. In this endeavour, the knowledge coming from the resurgent field of sociology, which facilitated an outlook on society as complex and differentiated, proved to be especially influential on political discourse. Furthermore, this profound social transformation prompted the CPCz to better define its own position. This was all the more urgent with the advent of 1968, when the grounds for the CPCz's leading role became shakier under the amount of public discontent and expression of distrust caused by the dissonance between the image of life in a socialist society painted by the political elite and people's lived

experience. In this environment, the party had to counteract the lurking resentment that might have jeopardised its position.

This article followed the political discourse and rhetorical strategies used to defend the party's leading role on the grounds of unity and trust. The article draws on Laclau's discourse analysis but, at the same time, does not conceive of the discourse of the 1968 political elite in isolation. It locates it in specific conditions and interactions with other discourses, specifically the sociologist's expert discourse, and shows how these areas intersect. This is especially evident in the use of the figure "unity," which permeated the expert discourse of the 1960s, but also was one of the key terms in the 1968 political discourse. Following sociological insights, the party sought to construct unity in a new way, not through a single class but by forming a coalition of progressive forces. Together with "trust," which was introduced to counteract public distrust of the party's leadership, the figure of "unity" served a dual purpose. The rhetorical strategies combined both spontaneous and centralist tendencies as they oscillated between a radical redefinition of the social order (where the leading role of the CPCz was not predetermined) and its conservation by securing the party's leading role as the only authority capable of fulfilling people's demands.