

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

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Habilitation thesis

Contesting post-socialism. Transformation of the Czech economic protest between 1989 and 2021

Reviewer

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Reading this exciting thesis about post-socialist economic protests in changing economic and political contexts has been a pleasure. I have summarised my comments in two major sections: general merits, including the main contribution and recommendations for further improvements. In both cases, I structured the comments by three topics: theory, data and method, and results.

(1) **Merits:** An assessment of the research's originality, significance, and impact.

The thesis examines the long-term evolution and structure of economic protest in the post-socialist society – the Czech Republic – by applying the Polanyan perspective that allows one to focus on how the relationship between the economic and political transformations relates to economic protest mobilisation. It advances our knowledge within social movement studies with a relational analysis of economic protests in a post-socialist setting, demonstrating that formally organised actors such as trade unions or political parties are better at cooperating with other organisations than informal organisations. At the same time, the last were more active protest organisers. The findings also provide new information about the fragmentation of Czech civil society, showing that there is little cooperation concerning economic protest mobilisation. As there are not many studies on economic protests, especially the ones focusing on post-socialist settings, the study fills an important gap in the literature.

The theoretical approach of the thesis is built on the Polanyan perspective, which helps analyse collective contention in economically and politically transforming societies. The approach allows for a more flexible analysis of mobilising actors than, for example, the Marxist approach. The perspective is then combined with other approaches from social movement research (e.g., against economic globalisation) and industrial relations. The author demonstrates a good knowledge of the research field and presents a nice overview of the existing scholarship. The presented relational approach to analysing economic contention is instrumental, as it allows one to focus on the collaboration and coalition-building process of different actors behind the economic protests. In sum, the theory section provides a nice overview of the existing studies, and the following empirical analysis makes good use of the presented concepts.

The thesis is built on *protest event data* carefully collected from the *Czech* news agency and coded by the author. It is a demanding and time-consuming task, and the author should be credited for it. There is also a nice description of the political and economic transformations in the Czech Republic since the late 1980s, the political actors involved in the economic protests, and the evolution of the actors' relationships over time. The author certainly has good knowledge of the case, data and the method(s) of analysis.

The overall *findings* of the thesis make an important contribution to the analysis of Czech economic protests – both in terms of describing the actors behind mobilisation and their cooperation since 1989. In particular, the analysis of cooperation during the different periods of Czech history is fundamental and demonstrates how the cooperation of protest actors can vary based on structural conditions. The thesis provides *new knowledge* by describing in great detail the networks/relations of the actors involved in the economic protests over a long period—covering the country's entire economic and political transformation. I consider the empirical description and analysis to be the most important contribution of the habilitation thesis.

(2) Recommendations: suggestions for improvement or further research

If this work will be published as a book, I would suggest reorganising the introduction so that it starts by spelling out the main contributions of the field of social movements and research on economic protests. Currently, this section is too late and is not explicit enough. It would be helpful to point out more clearly what we learn by analysing the post-socialist society. How this new knowledge would be helpful for a more general understanding of economic protest mobilisation and development? Formulating a straightforward research puzzle that will be answered in the thesis might be helpful, but currently, it is a bit hidden in the text.

Concerning the *theory* of who the activists are – while the author nicely presents the Polanyan perspective, it should be better related to the existing research on protest actors. The author acknowledges some of these studies in the introduction, but one wonders if approaches like resource mobilisation (from social movements) or power resource (from industrial relations) theories would also be helpful to some extent. The author also needs to explain more explicitly why the global justice movement is important in the post-socialist setting, where the economic and political transformations were still different (maybe more radical) from the ones in Western Europe in the 1990s. In the section about the role of grievances, I missed the reference to Martín Portos' book “Grievances and Public Protests” (2021), as that study is also interested in the economic protests and Spain experienced rather significant changes at times of the Great Recession. I also wonder why little attention is paid to the economic and political opportunity structure approaches. If these approaches are not particularly useful here, this should be explained.¹ In sum, the theoretical section of the thesis could be further elaborated, paying particular attention to formulating some clear hypotheses (rather than research questions on page 76) that will be tested in the empirical analysis. Some hypotheses are presented later (e.g., page 101), but these should appear earlier and relate to the theoretical approach.

Data and method

While the author mentions the case in section 5.3, it should have been explained earlier. In the introduction, it would be helpful to explain what kind of case is the case of the Czech Republic:

¹ A minor question: while I understand the term “countermovement” refers here to the mobilisation against or reaction to market reforms ([neo]liberalisation), in the context of social movements, the term is also used for describing social movement–countermovement interactions. Maybe this could be further explained.

Representative to post-socialist countries? Possibly not for the countries that were part of the Soviet Union, as the economic and political rule in the Eastern block and Soviet Republics differed, but there were also some interesting economic protests in the last (see, e.g., Uba, K. (2023). Estonian protest waves: Groups involved and motivating issues. In *Handbook of civil society and social movements in small states* (pp. 235-247). Routledge). Depending on the available space, it would also be helpful to provide a short historical overview of the political and economic developments before the 1980s, as transformation studies emphasise the importance of prior regimes for future developments, and it is likely that developments before the transition also play a role for the relations between the actors later on. Further, figures rather than tables could improve data presentation, and I would start with the overview of the number of protests over time (Figure 1) and then move further to the actors.

Findings

It would be good to reflect on the character of data in discussing the (unexpected) results of the significant protest activism of informally organised actors. Considering that protest event data is gathered from news agency, how accurate are they in the reporting of organising actors? Could it be that even if, for example, a trade union was behind the protest, the news reported about “workers” or “teachers”? Hence, how certain can we be that these were informally organised actors behind the mobilisation? Just a short reflection would be enough.

Finally, the empirical analysis and its results about economic protests, especially the changing cooperation networks over time in the Czech Republic, should be set into a broader context of the development of democracy and civil society, but even the economic relations in Central Eastern Europe. Considering that several authors have noted that post-communist/socialist countries have become more similar to other countries in (Western) Europe, do these trends in the Czech Republic during the years of “Consolidation” and “Populism” also reflect what happens elsewhere? If not, why?

(3) **Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** are built in the previous section, “Recommendations: suggestions for improvement or further research”.

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “Contesting post-socialism. Transformation of the Czech economic protest between 1989 and 2021” by Mgr. et Mgr. Jiří Navrátil, Ph.D. **fulfils** the requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Sociology.

Date: 31/12/2024

Signature: Katrin Uba