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# THE LOST RIVER PUNKVA: WHERE IS MARXISM IN CZECH ART HISTORY?

## MILENA BARTLOVÁ

The word “Punkva” in the title of this paper is the name not only of a subterranean river in the area of outstanding natural beauty called the Moravian Karst, but also of Czech Rail express train R870, a shuttle service that used to run between Brno and Prague. Perhaps one of the marketing geniuses at Czech Rail woke up one morning and realised that naming a train after a river that sinks into the ground wasn’t such a great idea. I was attracted by the word Punkva as a way of naming something akin to a means of transport that travels along fixed rails, but also something that moves unseen, underground.

Marxism in Czech art history is possessed of a similarly split personality. It both is and is not, or at least it is not seen. In the corpus of work devoted to this question in situ, as it were, i.e. during the period of Communist Party dictatorship, we find Marxism used as an umbrella term for all art history being officially undertaken in the country.<sup>1</sup> This is not only understandable, but from a certain perspective correct: the leading role of the Communist Party was enshrined in

1 Luděk NOVÁK “Výtvarná teorie v letech 1953–1960”, *Umění*, vol. 10, 1962, no. 2, pp. 160–176; František ATOUŠ, “Teorie a dějiny umění 1945–1965”, *Umění*, vol. 13, 1965, no. 3, pp. 217–232; Rostislav ŠVÁCHA, “Dějepis umění v současnosti”, in: Anděla HOROVÁ – Rudolf CHADRABA – Josef KRÁSA – Rostislav ŠVÁCHA (eds.), *Kapitoly z českého dějepisumu umění*, vol. 2, *Dvacáté století*, Prague: Odeon 1987, pp. 349–370.

the constitution, and Marxism, generally speaking, is the philosophical and theoretical basis of communism.<sup>2</sup> If we bear in mind that membership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was the sine qua non of holding higher office, including in the academic world, then we are entitled to describe the practice of Czech art history from the 1950s through to the 80s as Marxist.

So where did Marxism disappear after that article of the Czechoslovak constitution was expunged in December 1989? The generally accepted answer is that it never in reality existed as an intellectually serious position, that nobody except the flunkies of the regime took what it claimed to stand for seriously, that it was simply a formality, a sop to the authorities. This interpretation is supposedly supported by the fact that not even standard art history textbooks viewed Marxism as an independent category within art history, either Czech or global, and neither Donald Preziosi nor Eric Fernie treat it as such in their surveys of that era.<sup>3</sup> Even in the very place where the self-presentation of Czech Marxist art history should in theory be an incontrovertible given, i.e. under the appropriate entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Czech Fine Art* of 1975, there is no mention of the history of art as such, but only of art theory and aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

So is Marxism genuinely irrelevant to the study of art history? From an international perspective it would appear not. In 2006, Andrew Hemingway published *Marxism and the History of Art*, an overview of the topic. In this book we discover that Walter Benjamin is deemed a Marxist and that important figures

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In the original version of this essay, which I delivered at the conference "Between East and West" in November 2012 at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, I attempted a brief explanation of terms with which my audience was probably not familiar. During the peer-review stage of this essay, the terminology, especially the term *Marxism*, proved a stumbling block that could only be clarified by a large study of its own. And so I will leave to one side didactic considerations and use the following terms thus: *Marxism* will designate a philosophical position; *Marxism-Leninism* will designate the only officially acceptable ideology that between 1960 and 1989 was enshrined in the Czechoslovak constitution; *Stalinism* refers to the simplified ideology of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union under Stalin's government; *Western Marxism* designates the Marxism to be found during the existence of the Soviet bloc in other non-communist European countries; *Revisionism* refers to the attempt to revise Marxism within the Eastern bloc between 1956 and 1968. In order to understand the theme discussed here it is essential to distinguish between the official rhetoric and self-identification on the one hand, and genuine social processes, including ideological, on the other. Cf. Archie BROWN, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, London: Harper Collins 2009; Eric HOBBSBAWM, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*, London: Little, Brown 2011; Tony JUDT, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, London: Penguin 2008, especially pp. 106–146; Michal KOPEČEK, *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce: Zrod a počátky marxistického revizionismu ve střední Evropě 1953–1960*, Prague: Argo 2009.

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Petr WITTLICH, *Literatura k dějinám umění: Vývojový přehled*, 2nd enlarged edition, Prague: Karolinum 2008; Jiří KROUPA, *Metodologie dějin umění*, vol. 1, *Školy dějin umění*, 2nd edition, Brno: Masaryk University 2007; *idem*, *Metodologie dějin umění*, vol. 2, *Metody dějin umění*, Brno: Masaryk University 2010; Donald PREZIOSI, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009; *idem*, *Re-thinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1989; Eric FERNIE, *Art History and Its Methods: Critical Anthology*, London: Phaidon 1995.

such as Meyer Schapiro and T. J. Clark are considered Marxist art historians. We learn that Horst Bredekamp launched his career on the back of a Marxist dissertation. And this is not to speak of Frederick Antal, a student of Max Dvořák, or the founding figure of social art history Arnold Hauser. And what about art history in countries of the Soviet bloc, of which Czechoslovakia was one?<sup>5</sup> In other words, considerations regarding the presence and character of Marxism in Czech art history are far from trivial. I have offered a more thoroughgoing analysis of the relationship between Czech art history and Marxism elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Here I wish to focus on what I propose calling the “iconological turn” that Czech art history, along with its Polish counterpart, contributed to Marxist art history, the theoretical foundation of which was laid by Jaromír Neumann.

What are we to understand by the term Marxism vis-à-vis art history? It clearly refers to a certain type of social history deploying a dialectical concept of development, the most fundamental category of which is the social dynamic of classes, and situates the motivation of individuals within a materialistic framework. If we compare this general description with current trends in art history, we see how broadly Marxism asserted itself as a philosophical *habitus* within European thinking of the twentieth century, especially after the Second World War, something that Jonathan Harris prescribed for art history.<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hemingway, on the other hand, takes issue with Harris, feminism and Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of art, and insists that, as well as its social aspects, art has

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Zdeněk MATHAUSER, the entry “Marxism and the theory of art”, in: Emanuel POCHÉ (ed.), *Encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění*, Prague: Academia 1975, pp. 294–297.

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Andrew HEMINGWAY (ed.), *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, London: Pluto 2006. Cf. also *idem*, “Marxism and Art History after the Fall of Communism”, *Art Journal*, vol. 55, 1996, no. 2, pp. 20–27. Not even here does the author take into account the existence of art history in the latter half of the twentieth century in countries of the Soviet bloc, but simply addresses the question of what the downfall of state socialism in these countries meant for Marxist theory, including art history.

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The following text represents a reworking of the larger study Milena BARTLOVÁ, “Czech Art History and Marxism”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2012, no. 7, <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/bartlova.pdf> (accessed 16 August 2013). I will not make further reference to the more detailed argument and documents contained in that text, which follows on from an article published in the following issue of the same magazine: “Continuity and Discontinuity in the Czech Legacy of the Vienna School of Art History”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2013, no. 8, <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/bartlovc3a1.pdf> (accessed 16 August 2013).

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See his *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge 2001.

a distinctly noetic function that must be taken into consideration by Marxist art history and aesthetics. In my opinion, this emphasis on the noetic function of art reveals how Marxists can become marooned in the philosophical dimension of the nineteenth century if they reject the linguistic turn and the achievements of semiotics and structuralism. I propose differentiating between a Marxist-style social history of art on the one hand, and an examination of the noetic function of art (i.e. questions pertaining to realism) on the other, as a key to understanding specific developments on the Czech art history scene during the 1960s.

When the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, backed by the Soviet Union, came to power in 1948 and occupied all the country's academic, research and art institutions, Czech art history found itself in a strange situation.<sup>8</sup> Unlike those disciplines in which structuralist and semiotic approaches were now the norm, it did not have to suppress and reevaluate its tradition of the first half of the twentieth century in the manner of Jan Mukařovský. Instead, it could with great success fall back on an anti-German, nationalist and confrontational line of argument, which in the wake of the Second World War and the displacement of Czech Germans slotted without problem into day-to-day events in society.<sup>9</sup> However, unlike historiography, Czech art history had almost no real experience with Marxism. In this respect it is telling that the entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Czech Fine Art* refers only to Zdeňek Nejedlý. The theories of Karel Teige were not regarded as belonging to the sphere of art history but more as an aesthetic approach relating to the art of the time. In addition, Teige's texts from the 1940s had to wait until 1966 before they were published.<sup>10</sup>

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Regarding the cultural and political situation cf. Jiří KNAPÍK, *Únor a kultura: Sovětizace české kultury 1948–1950*, Prague: Libri 2004; *idem*, *V zajetí moci: Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři 1948–1956*, Prague: Libri 2006.

Regarding the methodology of Czech art history at that time, see the references in note 6.

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I have examined this tradition of Czech art history in my book *Naše, národní umění: Studie z dějin dějepisu umění*, Brno: Barrister & Principal 2009

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See note 6.

In this contribution I focus on the methodology of art history, even though the discourse of the time was dominated by a theory of the production of art. Finalising this theory was deemed an urgent task, since it was to assist artists and critics understand how their work would correspond to the new social and political order. This dominant discourse might explain why, instead of focusing on social history, Czech art history, nominally Marxist or Marxist-Leninist, turned its attention to realism. At the core of this debate was Lenin's theory of reflection, which attempts to explain the noetic role of art and formed the basis of the activities of art historians from the end of the 1940s to the mid-60s. The outcomes of these efforts include two studies by Vincenc Kramář. Kramář had become acquainted with Marxism before the war, joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1945, did not capitulate to Stalinist terminology, and diligently attempted, through the development of Marxist principles, to show that realism does not mean the simple replication of reality as observed, but its creative refashioning.<sup>11</sup> In a private correspondence with Kramář not intended for publication, Karel Teige expressed similar feelings, albeit far more pointedly. However, he rejected Kramář's solution and insisted that the disparaging label of formalism was incorrect not only when applied to cubism but also to abstract art.<sup>12</sup> Both men agreed that socialist realism reproduced petit bourgeois values and was supported by reactionaries who "talk loudly of Mánes, Němcová, Smetana and Aleš while displaying nothing but petit bourgeois taste".<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after 1948 it became clear that the Stalinist policies being enforced were intellectually not up to the job. Gripped by insecurity, Czech art history sought recourse in the discourse closest to it, namely that of the circle surrounding the Vienna School of Art History. Inspiration was sought in the important

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Vincenc KRAMÁŘ, "O realismu a formalismu", *Výtvarné umění*, vol. 4, 1954, no. 1, pp. 45–48; see also note 6.

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Karel TEIGE, "Pokus o názvoslovnou a pojmoslovnou revizi", in: *Vývojové proměny v umění*, Prague: NČVU 1966, pp. 9–139.

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Vincenc KRAMÁŘ, *Kulturně politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění*, Prague: Svoboda 1946, p. 7.

text by Frederick Antal, a student of Max Dvořák, entitled *Florentské malířství a jeho sociální pozadí* (*Florentine Painting and its Social Background*), which was translated for this purpose in 1954 only seven years after the original was published in London.<sup>14</sup> However, the twenty-eight-year old Jaromír Neumann criticised Antal on the basis that his work could under no circumstances be called Marxist. Antal's error, it was claimed, was that he moved directly from a stylistic analysis to a class analysis and viewed art as the mechanical product of the classes or strata to which its clients belonged. Though Antal's work was made accessible to a Czech readership, it was rejected out of hand, the reasoning being that it was too close to Marx and did not take into account the ideas of Engels and, more importantly, Lenin. Three years before, in 1951, Neumann's dissertation on seventeenth century Czech realist painting was published as a book, and Neumann duly underwent the rite of public confession, during which he declared that only the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and his knowledge of Stalin's teachings had inoculated him from the toxic influence of structuralism as represented by the work of the Mukařovský-influenced writer Pavel Kropáček and the Slovak structuralists.<sup>15</sup> The dissertation was clearly written under the influence of Antal's social interpretation of Marxist art history, and if the changes to Neumann's position as formulated in the postscript to *Florentine Painting* had not been made, could have provided a firm foundation for Marxist art history in this country. The reader cannot ignore the period rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is clear that Neumann's criticism of Antal is still valid even from today's perspective. It no longer matters to us that Neumann claims that not enough attention is devoted to Lenin. In any case, these days Antal, Hauser and Max Raphael are criticised for the same reason on the basis that their "rudimentary form of

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Frederick ANTAL, *Florentské malířství a jeho společenské pozadí*, Prague: SNKLHU 1954.

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Jaromír NEUMANN, "Boj o socialistický realismus a úkoly naší výtvarné kritiky a historie umění", in: *idem* – Jan KVĚT – Jaroslav PEŠINA – Vladimír WAGNER, *Za vědecké dějiny umění a novou kritiku*, Prague: Orbis 1951, pp. 19–79, especially p. 51. Cf. Pavel KROPÁČEK, *Malířství doby husitské: Česká desková malba první poloviny XV. století*, Prague: Česká akademie věd a umění 1946; Ján BAKOŠ, "Československý štrukturalizmus a dejepis umenia: Pražský lingvistický krúžok a dejiny umenia", in: *Štyri trasy metodológie dejín umenia*, Bratislava: VEDA 2000, pp. 161–220. See Josef VOJVODÍK – Marie LANGEROVÁ, *Patos v českém umění, poezii a umělecko-estetickém myšlení čtyřicátých let 20. století*, Prague: Argo 2014.

Marxist art history” could only have been completed later by the followers of the Frankfurt School, with the help of Walter Benjamin and the rediscovery of Aby Warburg in the 1990s.**16**

The influence of Stalinism was manifest in the work of Jaroslav Pešina, the son-in-law, heir and successor to Antonín Matějček (the leading figure of Czech art history at the time, who joined the Communist Party in 1948 and was only saved from the necessity of confronting the Stalinist regime by his premature death two years later).**17** Pešina’s research into the Late Gothic led him to the Hussite movement, which the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia regarded as its legitimising historical epoch. Pešina concluded that the Hussite revolution, as an analogy to the privileged noetic status of the proletariat, was fundamental, and from this it ensued that the art of that time was not marginal and insignificant, but, on the contrary, deserved full qualitative appreciation within the context of world art.**18** Unlike Kramář or Neumann, Pešina worked with the lessons of a Marxism simplified by Leninism and Stalinism, and at the start of the 1950s even appeared to succumb to the seductive promise held out by Marxism of providing simple answers to complex questions.**19** Though Pešina relinquished this position in the latter half of the 1950s, the outcomes resulting from these procedures are still being deployed today. Perhaps the perfect expression of a teacher’s ideas is to be found in the work of their pupil, in this case the study by Karel Stejskal on the realist character of the *Rajhrad Altarpiece*, originally a dissertation from 1953. Stejskal defends the work against accusations of naturalism and describes the level of progressive realism in terms of “the degree to which the painter approached reality and grasped it through creative means”**20** Though this may appear to today’s reader to be a typical example of ideological

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Otto Karl WERCKMEISTER, “The Turn from Marx to Warburg in West German Art History 1968–90”, in: HEMINGWAY, *Marxism and History of Art*, pp. 214.

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JUDT, *Reappraisals*, p. 135 (who cites Leszek Kołakowski). Cf. the criticism of Marxism in Karl POPPER, *Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, London: Routledge 1945.

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See note 6.

**18**

Jaroslav PEŠINA, “Triptych monogramisty I. V. M.: Příspěvek ke studiu problematiky českého malířství 15. století”, *Umění*, vol. 2, 1954, no. 1, pp. 21–40.

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Karel STEJSKAL, “Podoba císaře Zikmunda – prostředkem boje husitského umění proti feudální reakci”, *Acta Universitatis Carolinae: Philologica ethistorica*, 1954, no. 7, pp. 67–75; *idem*, “Archa rajhradská a její místo ve vývoji českého umění první poloviny 15. století”, *Universitas Carolina: Philosophica*, vol. 1, 1955, no. 1, p. 64.

rhetoric, in reality the emphasis on creativity and painterly subjectivity implied, as far as the period discourse was concerned, a degree of intellectual openness and an opposition to primitive dogmatism.

Ten years later Karel Stejskal was one of the protagonists of the iconological turn. The groundwork had been laid by Jaromír Neumann at the end of the 1950s<sup>21</sup> when, instead of a one-sided focus on the political engagement of art, he proposed that consideration be given to the creative dimension of the artwork and its sources, i.e. the artist's imagination. Contrary to his earlier criticism, he now regarded the methodological approach taken by Max Dvořák to be inspirational for the way it sought in the development of art not a mechanical but a dialectical reflection of the historical consciousness. While in 1956, Neumann believed Dvořák to be an incorrigible idealist, four years later he had changed his opinion completely and come to regard the latter's work as a possible basis for a Marxist art history, above all thanks to its dialectical methodology. In both cases there is talk of "late" Dvořák and his principle of "the history of art as the history of the spirit".<sup>22</sup> Iconology as Neumann had encountered it in the post-war work of Hans Sedlmayr rather than Erwin Panofsky, became a way of combining Dvořák's tradition of spirituality with Marxism's demand that art history recognise the ideological dimension of history.

And so the Marxist-Leninist variant of iconology became a sophisticated tool allowing for the extraction of the noetic ability of the painting to contribute to historical consciousness. From this perspective the iconological method retained a great attraction for Czech art history from the 1960s right through to the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> It was more focused on Dvořák and Sedlmayr than on Panofsky, and visual motifs were interpreted as bearers of symbolic meaning even without

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Jaromír NEUMANN, "K dnešním metodickým otázkám dějepisu umění: Poznámky o výtvarné představivosti", *Umění*, vol. 6, 1956, no. 2, pp. 178–188; for an overview see *idem*, *Umění a skutečnost: Úvahy o realismu v uměleckém vývoji*, Prague: NČVU 1963.

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Jaromír NEUMANN, "Dílo Maxe Dvořáka a dnešek", *Umění*, vol. 9, 1961, no. 6, pp. 525–575. This issue of *Umění* was given over to an evaluation of Dvořák's work.

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It would appear that a similar situation reigned in Poland, where the dominant figure was Jan Białostocki, and in Hungary too. However, not enough comparative studies and synoptic overviews are available for us to attempt a more detailed description of these relations. Clarification of the question as to whether Białostocki or Neumann was the first to make this discovery is also open to discussion, for which I would take this opportunity to thank Wojciech Bałus of Krakow. For reflections on iconology in Hungary, cf. Görgyi E. SZŐNYI, "Warburg's Intuitions in Light of Postmodern Challenges", *Umění*, vol. 49, 2001, no. 1, pp. 3–10.

reference to period texts. This symbolism could be viewed as a secular or political theme that in the middle ages and baroque period was overlain with religious motifs but could now be revealed as the genuinely original meaning of artworks. Iconography was stripped of its internal consistency based on a neo-Kantian noetic base. Instead, the creative ability of the art historian to achieve direct insight into the psychology of forms took precedence. Instead of a confrontation with written texts, and with no thought given to the methods of semiotics, “hidden symbolic meanings” were revealed.

An example of such imaginative work would be Karel Stejskal’s next book, in which he reinterpreted the sacred meaning of the *Arma Christi* in the illuminated manuscript of St. George’s Convent, Prague, as a manifestation of “folk magic”.<sup>24</sup> In actual fact, this method of reading between the lines in the belief that the real meaning of a public utterance had to be deciphered and thus often shown to be the opposite of what it appeared to be at first sight, was a common, everyday semiotic practice in the sixties, seventies and eighties in the countries of the Soviet bloc – this, after all, was the only meaningful way to make sense of daily newspapers.

I believe it is now becoming clearer why Max Dvořák was so revered in Czech art history circles. Not only was he a respected Czech-speaking member of the Viennese School, but from the start of the sixties, thanks to his imprimatur, Czech art history was finally able to take upon itself the task of establishing a methodology that would be acceptable to the official ruling ideology. It could call itself Marxist and at the same time was able to retain a position of elitist “bourgeois humanism”. This tradition was upheld, somewhat paradoxically, in a sphere dominated by distinguished, well dressed men wearing bow ties. The

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Karel STEJSKAL – Ema URBÁNKOVÁ, *Pasionál Přemyslovny Kunhuty*, Prague: Odeon 1975, especially pp. 58–71. In addition to a host of specialist studies, the most important outcomes of the Czech “Marxist iconology” of the 1960s included two books: Rudolf CHADRABA, *Dürers Apokalypse: Eine ikonologische Deutung*, Prague: Tschechoslowakische Akademie der Wissenschaften 1964, and Josef KRÁSA, *Rukopisy Václava IV.*, Prague: Odeon 1971. Both works achieved international recognition because they were published in German (see Josef KRÁSA, *Die Handschriften König Wenzels IV.*, Vienna: Forum 1971). The themes examined in both books expanded on classics of the Viennese School by Max Dvořák and Julius von Schlosser.

emphasis laid on the autonomy of artistic development as opposed to a concept of art as an activity embedded in social practice also met the need to defend creative freedom confronting manipulation on the part of an authoritative regime led by the Communist Party.

Though the synthesis of the “iconological turn” self-profiled as Marxist, it was characterised by a lack of interest in class analysis or even a social approach to art history. Over the last two decades, socially oriented approaches have asserted themselves in Czech art history, inspired for instance by Robert Suckal and Svetlana Alpers.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the belief in the primary autonomous character of artistic creativity has not weakened, nor has the methodological standpoint of strict formalism and faith in the validity of developmental laws.

We can say, then, that Czech art history defended itself effectively against Marxism. It was perhaps an ideological victory, but history was damaged in the process. The fact that it created a Dvořákian version of iconology that it called Marxist, or rather Marxist-Leninist art history, meant it did not need inspiring revisionism nor a deeper interest in phenomenology, even though both revisionism and phenomenology, especially in the 1960s, opened up vibrant contact with intellectual developments in democratic countries. At the same time, a gap opened up between art history in the narrower sense of the term, and contemporary art theory or criticism, which needed new inspiration in order to overcome Stalinism and was inclined more towards phenomenology.

The commonly made claim that theory is not cultivated in Czech art history does not apply to the fifties and sixties. Never had such a quantity of methodological texts been written in Czech. However, the discipline did not subsequently rise to the implicit challenge issued by these texts, either during the

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Martin NODL, “Dějiny umění a sociální historie”, in: *Dějepisectví mezi vědou a politikou: Úvahy o historiografii 19. a 20. století*, Brno: CDK 2007, pp. 219–231.

period of normalisation or for that matter now. There might even be an element of psychological repression involved. Memories of the communist regime serve as a warning of where the development of theory, let alone the broader social and political engagement of art historians, might lead. All of these represent reasons why art history in this country remains so inward looking.