CZECH POLITICAL PRISONERS: REMEMBERING, RELATEDNESS, RECONCILIATION

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Reconciliation: Recovering Face

> The post-totalitarian blues are haunting the countries of the other Europe...
>
> -Rupnik 1995:61

The State and Its 'Violent Ritual'

In the summer of 1995 I found myself in Prague looking closely at the faces of people on the streets. I asked myself questions about "their"/"our" memories of the oppression.

One Sunday morning in Cafe Gany's, I noticed a small group of older men. The questions I'd been asking in the streets about faces and memories came to rest on them; I wanted to find out who they were. I introduced myself and asked about the reason for their gathering. I was told they were Mukls. In 1948 the StB (State Secret Police) had arrested them. Their lives had been controlled by the State until 1989. I realized then, though their narratives were about the past, their faces and memories were constituted in the present.

This study is the story of men and women who survived Czechoslovakian Communist concentration camps. Men and women disappeared, were arrested, imprisoned, interrogated, tortured, put on trial, convicted and sentenced to forced labor camps. In 1948 in Czechoslovakia "political others" became political prisoners. New forms of political practices developed under the institution of the totalitarian Czechoslovak Communist state. These new regimes of totalitarian political power produced culturally specific forms of political violence. The political power of the state was constituted in ritualized forms of violence. Between 1948 and 1961 some citizens recognized by the state as 'political others' were subjected to such ritualized political violence. The link between ritualized violence and state subjects' political passage laid the groundwork for the formation of new social identities. Like other members of the Czech and Slovak states, former prisoners are now facing the present post-totalitarian 'remaking' of life. In contrast to society at large, the political prisoners' recovery from the totalitarian past has proven that the ethics of political life and individual 'coming' to terms with the past is closely related and crucial to their efforts toward reconciliation. They call themselves Mukl/Muklyne(s) – a man/woman selected for "liquidation" (in Czech language - Muz urceny k likvidaci). A Mukl was the subject of public defacement, the subject of 'defacement' as an act of publicly denied visibility of "face" or 'loss of face', was 'publicly shamed' by the state, as a political other. In the post-totalitarian state the 'political other', Mukl from the previous political regime, remains as an 'other' through distinct desires and acts of 'coming to terms' with the experience of organized violence.

The focus of this study is on two concepts: Subject formations in the context of violent practices of the state, and remaking life afterwards. I write about social suffering, subjectivity, remaking life after violence and the register of hope within the Mukls' language of 'reconciliation'. I am concerned with the tensions between individual and social experiences of suffering caused by state organized violence. Memory, time and place are instrumental notions for my interpretative analysis.

In my analysis of Muklhood I have used the term "ritual" to encompass state violent acts used to maintain political power over the 'political other'. At the same time the ritual becomes the form of passage from the position of political other, enemy of the state, to a new belonging to the Mukl outlaw community. The notion of everydayness is understood as the site of the ordinary.

Over a long period of time during which state violence and terror affected not only Mukls and their families, but the whole society governed by the Czechoslovak Communist party, the boundaries between specific violent events and everydayness collapsed. State terror, in its origins focused on the 'political enemy of the state', was diffused outside of the institutions such as police, prisons and the courts, institutions guarding the state's political regimes, and became part of everyday life within the Czechoslovak state. In that sense, subjection to state violent rituals affected the Mukls' 'relatedness'. Ultimately such

practices impacted ‘relatedness’ within Czechoslovak society as a whole. This study is limited to a number of individual informants and therefore cannot be understood as representation of the general experience of all prisoners of the Czechoslovak Communist regime.

Emerging from recent ethnographic works, based on many encounters with the experience of social suffering in various political contexts, is a new theoretical framework of anthropologists examining political life in the context of the production of violence. Alan Feldman identified this new movement as a “New Ethnography of Violence” (Feldman 1991). Such recent ethnographic investigation has come to encompass social suffering, subjectivity and violence, and reconciliation. These analytical concepts are developed with a diachronic dimension – concern with change. These scholars ask very specifically how people pursue their daily lives when life is transformed by the engagement with violence. Das and Kleinman ask the question: How is the act of writing on violence to be conceptualized? (Das and Kleinman 2000:12). Further, they argue that whether some see violence “as a remnant of long standing primordial conflict”, or others classify it as “a sign of the distortion of focal moral worlds by forces (national or global) which originate outside of those worlds and over which local communities can exercise little control” (Das and Kleinman 2000:1), it is necessary to consider the formation of the subject position. For them “subjectivity -- the felt interior experience of the person that includes his or her positions in a field of relational power -- is produced through the experience of violence and the manner in which global flows involving images, capital, and people become entangled with local logics in identity formation” (Das and Kleinman 2000:1).

Drawing from my own ethnographic data I have asked similar questions and employed similar analytical categories, concepts or themes developed within the new ethnography of violence. Working through the specifics it became evident that to acquire an understanding of Czech Mukl subjectivities formation it was necessary to see state terror as it was embodied in violent events. The notion of time and space in the context of violence became relevant. One ethnography of violence that struck me as closely aligned with my case study was Feldman’s Formations of Violence (Feldman 1991). Violent ritual is not understood by Feldman as a specific event, but as the transitional passage through the repetitive political terror. Feldman discussed this journey through the dark as a passage through the violent ritual. “Arrest and interrogation, like other forms of terror, transform social life and historical experience into encysted ritualized enclosures” (Feldman 1991:86). The rhythm of what Feldman identifies as “simulations of death”, “restoration of time”, and “transformation movement of the political actor through the interior of the state” (Feldman 1991: 137), makes this political act a rite of passage.

Violence and Face

The political geography of Central Eastern Europe changed when the power of long-term national regimes’ failed under the pressures of local insurgencies and economic collapse.

(For historical context see Wheaton and Kavan 1992.)[1] 1 Two major aspects of Mukls’ recovery seem to unite individual and collective efforts at reconciliation: inventing a ‘new language’ and ‘recovering face’.

Restoring Mukls’ face is a counteraction to Mukls defacement by the state. The process of the defacement of the Mukls shaped the ways in which Mukls see themselves. One aspect of Czecholslovak state ritual was a strategic ‘isolation’ of the prisoner from society and family. I intend to show how prisoners responded to such ‘strategic isolation’. The isolation produced “social invisibility” (Poole 1997) of citizens considered the enemy of the state. Such invisibility is felt by the prisoners as a “defacement” (Taussig 1999) or “loss of face” (Das 1993).

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[1] After internal political changes in Czechoslovakia, Soviet occupants were forced to leave the cities and army bases. Rapid political change in Central Eastern Europe shifted power and made it possible for the development of new political projects. This historical moment of political change has been reflected upon by political analyst, Jiri Pehe. In a historical-political perspective facing the “new” political reality has also been discussed by Jacques Rupnik. Rupnik’s discussion of this political transition of the Czech Republic is comparative in the sense that he is constantly reminding us of the historical-political location of the Czech Republic within Central Europe. For Rupnik the contemporary desire and expression of Czechs is to belong to “Europe”, rather than what he identified as an “other Europe”- meaning former Communist Eastern Europe (Rupnik 1995).

Mukls went through the process of defacement after arrest and while interrogated. During the trial, judicial and public defacement finalized Mukls' 'loss of face'. Their visibility was unwelcome by the political establishment and its sympathizers. The individual 'political other' was subjected to strategic violence. Such violence was not random, but carefully crafted by the state. The patterns of violence in Mukls' narratives are latent in three distinct events: arrest, interrogations and trial. My interest in understanding what this state production of violence means for the Mukls led me to the concept of 'state violent ritual'.

Arrest

Cenek was very proud of the view from his balcony. His balcony on the rooftop of a Prague center city apartment building was almost bigger than the attached apartment. I could see Prague's red rooftops, church towers, and Prague castle in the distance. Immediately below was the dark courtyard of the Bartolomejska Police station. Cenek saw me looking down and said:

> Cenek: That's where 'they' took me when I was arrested for the first time. This used to be my mother's apartment. They were taking me in wearing handcuffs and I looked up. There on the balcony, stood my mother. It was the last time I saw her. After that I never saw her again. She died when I was in prison.

In 1996, during the second year of my fieldwork in Prague, I was invited one evening to Cenek's place for a drink and conversation. It was my first time in his studio which used to be his mother's apartment. Our plan was to talk about his production of a radio show in the briefly liberalized 1960's about prisons, camps and Muklhood during the 1950s era.

The short episode cited above from 'our' (Cenek and my) time on the balcony became for me a critical 'ethnographic' moment. I realized the view from the past he shared with me was not just a powerful symbolic image of Mukl arrest in his memory, revealing something about the historical moment. The view experienced during his arrest is today part of his everyday landscape. The vision of everyday becomes the vision of the coexistence of past and present.

The return of Mukls' voice to arrest is not so much a signifier of the beginning of long term suffering, as it is a point of reference symbolic for the political paradox of double belonging to the state, temporality of citizenship, and the rupture of private life. The event of arrest has been established by Mukls as an early point of reference for defining their subjectivity. In many cases immediate invisibility after their arrests and the occurrence of disappearance while arrested was a form of defacement in the public and private eye.

Lasting images of arrest and significant points of reference within Mukls' remembering have the potential to reach beyond the boundaries of time and space. Lawrence Langer in writing on Holocaust testimonies stated that testimony is a form of memory. Langer points out that while the faculty of memory can function in the present to recall a personal history forming a smooth flow, simultaneously against this works what he calls 'disruptive' memory. He wrote, "Contemporality becomes the controlling principle of these testimonies, as witnesses struggle with the impossible task of making their recollections of the camp experience coalesce with the rest of their lives" (Langer 1991). Langer's central argument is that memory is not neutral and remembering trauma (he spoke of Holocaust testimonies) is not chronological in the sense of time, but what he called "durational". Durational time resists and undermines, according to Langer, what appears to the listener as chronological time. The listener-analyst, he writes, "is a self-conscious servant to time" and when the narrator tells the story he or she is 'out of time' (Langer 1991:15). Holocaust testimonies, as he observed, are content with the paradox of self-divided memory. Through the doubleness of the view, Cenek has to face every day the violation of his relatedness to his mother. In this instance of visual multiplicity (the image from the past and the view of today) I see the connectedness of past and present in his life today. Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman describe this tension between a memory and time: "For the story to count as memory it must have a feeling of pastness about it, yet violence distorts the sense of time so that it becomes difficult to say when the past enters the present" (Das and Kleinman 2000:12). Mukls' testimony is a form of memory, constituted in the present, further understood (from the narrator's perspective) as a story told "out of time" (Langer 1991). While interviewed, they told their stories chronologically. In between interviews, during our informal conversations, violence from the past was often a point of reference. Small episodes after arrest or from time served in the prisons often became a point of reference when expressing their everyday experience in the present. Mukls' sense of self is tied closely to their memory of trauma.

The early formations of Mukls' subjectivities and state violent practices developed symbiotically. Such violent practices in Czechoslovakia were modeled after Stalin's Soviet totalitarian system, defined by Hannah Arendt in her work The Origins of Totalitarianism as Soviet state "violent rituals" (Arendt 1966). Arendt's defining of such violent practices as violent ritual suggests that totalitarian violent practices are not only events or processes; they are also conditions to which people were subjected and under which they sought to survive.

From the political elites' point of view, arrest was an "activity of policing" (Asad 1997:289) within the institution of a modern state. For the state, arrest "is to be understood as a practical logic integral to the maintenance of the nation state sovereignty, much like warfare" (Asad 1997:296). From the Mukls' point of view the political 'project' of intensive silencing and defacing of the 'political other' is tied to arrest as a point of reference. Feldman wrote about arrest in the context of violence in Northern Ireland: "Arrest is the political art of individualizing disorder" (Feldman 2000:109). Under extreme cases of violence such as the war in Ireland arrest no longer requires "legal code" for securing a claim to truth (Feldman 2000:109). Feldman sees arrest as a "passageway" to violent death or as the "corridor that opens up paramilitary praxis to a self-reflexive framing power, agency, and the body" (Feldman 2000:106). He pointed out an important duality: "the function of arrest as a biographical experience capable of generating collective political meanings" (Feldman 2000: 97). Such political duality of arrest, surrounded by silence and secrecy leads Feldman to a conceptualization of the reproduction of collective violence and political subject. "Subject formation, a pivotal mechanism for the production of political ideology, can be located within the biographical conjuncture formed by arrest/interrogation experiences and the construction of body" (Feldman 2000:98).

Mukls organized in the political resistance movement expected to be arrested, but for many others, arrest was an unanticipated violation of their ordinary life. For some it was also an event, based on a 'mistake' that changed their life and according to some arrest was an act of 'disappearance'. Kafka expressed the same in the beginning of The Trial: "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning" (Kafka 1974:1). It is Kafka's notion of fictive, unreal, an unsettling feeling of a terrible mistake made by an abstract dominant 'higher power', a type of administrative power, that is characteristic of many of Mukls' references to arrest. In spite of differing justifications for arrest, and various modes of arrest, Mukls share this exposure to a violent act by the state. In my reconciliation narratives, I also emphasize the problematics of the notions of 'truth'. I have used the term 'fictive', as some other ethnographers have (Feldman 2000, Taussig 1999, Ross 2001), to unpack complexities and multiple levels of the impact of violence on specific social groups such as Czech political prisoners.

The 1948 arrests (for many) sharpened political life in Czechoslovakia. Arrest became an act of denial by the state of Mukls belonging to their family and state. Kinship and citizenship ties were selected for destruction under the totalitarian regime. To understand Mukls' discourse it is essential to recognize their shared and stated perception of arrest as a violent act. The "political other" through such violent ritual became political prisoners.

While Cenek's arrest is unique, his arrest is symbolic of rupture of kinship ties, marked by violence for all Mukls. The family institution had the potential to offer solidarity to its members against the political opposition - the state. The state, with an awareness of this potential, targeted the family. The interruption of family life under the totalitarian political regime is remembered by Mukls as a very specific event, such as Cenek's remembering: missing their relatives and being marked as enemies, but also as a long - term struggle of "defacement"- losing the face.

<u>The Power of the 'Secret'</u>

Instances of Mukls' defacement were spoken of throughout their narratives in different contexts. Muklyne Albina described this:

> Albina: When they were transporting us from Pankrac to Bartolomejska, the bus was full of women. It was strange, they were transporting us through Prague and people were coming in and out of shops, carrying packages, and laughing. The public didn't notice. I was thinking how can I understand that they – people - didn't know, that they could care less about us and how we suffer. We were unhappy to see how the whole nation ignored us; we expected the nation to stand by us. I was

in the arrest cell a long time. I was waiting for the interrogations. They were bad. It was only later that the public learned what was happening.

Invisible to the public, transported back and forth between prisons and police stations, Mukls found themselves in a vacuum. Social invisibility to other citizens was a form of state secrecy instrumental for developing alienation between Mukls and the rest of society. “In terms of creation of fear and dominance there is very little differentiation here between physical assault and scopic power; each reinforces and simulates the other” (Feldman 2000:59). The power of invisibility, according to Feldman, created through defacement, as a cultivation of non-seeing, is part of the dominant power of violence. He examined how the political fictionalization of vision can become the mechanics of power. Vision that has been politicized falls into the genealogy of ‘real’ and ‘fictive’. According to Feldman seeing can become a mechanism of power and human vision can become an instrument of what he called “scopic regime” (Feldman 2000:52). In

Feldman’s ethnography the ‘Visual Realism’, in the sense of realist aesthetics, becomes a “depictive vehicle” (Feldman 2000: 59) for the expression of violence. Such ‘visual realism’ perceived by Feldman as created through the defacement of the human eye and through the cultivation of a certain type of nonseeing, becomes an inevitable part of the structures of dominant power and violence. Such a ‘visual regime’, is located outside of the “conventional practices of visualization” (Feldman 2000:59).

Secrecy was interwoven from arrest to camp confinement into the very nature of violent rituals practiced by the state. The place and condition of the arrested member of the family remained a secret. During the interrogation stage, when prisoners were transported from Pankrac prison to interrogation rooms in the Bartolomejska police station, secrecy was built into the politics of torture. The secrecy of torture is, according to Foucault, key to understanding the change of the form of punishment from “public ritual” and performative character to “modern secret”. “Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process” (Foucault 1977:9). According to Foucault under modern forms of punishment, the punished is to be defaced and can’t be faced by others. Mukls’ social invisibility or “defacement” during the interrogations continued into the events of the trial and life in the camps afterwards.

Vision as a domain of political discourse is also a significant theme in anthropological investigations of terror and violence by Taussig (1999). He took the idea of political defacement and discussed it in the context of a philosophical understanding of the face by Nietzsche and a vision by Benjamin. Vision, visibility, invisibility as a domain of political discourse and the reflection of fictive, mimetic and its conversion to means of distribution of political power (Taussig 1999). He wrote: “When the human body, a nation’s flag, money, or a public statue is ‘defaced’, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself. It is now in a state of desecration, the closest many of us are going to get to the sacred of the modern world” (Taussig 1999:1). He takes the face to be “the figure of appearance, the appearance of appearance” (Taussig 1999:3). The face for him is a location, a place of “coexistence in facility of both mask and window to the soul” (Taussig 1999:224), and as he expressed: “Crossing back and forth across the face as border between mask and window to the soul is our necessary task, and it is in this “disproportion”, between the act and that to which the act gives access, that we discern the presence of the “always beyond” that the fetish secretes” (1999:224). Both Taussig’s and Feldman’s understanding of the interrelatedness between the notions of ‘fictive’ and ‘vision’ is relevant to political forms of silencing and of producing social invisibility. Taussig’s conceptual proposition of defacement as an analytical category, made it possible for me to formulate how photographic ‘face reading’ is relevant to a project about reconciliation.

In my photographs, the face (rather than the photographic portraits of prisoners) has its own expressive power in opposition to the text. Giorgio Agamben finds the face, just as language, exclusively the property of humanness. In fact, the face and language possess for Agamben the contradicting power between being the place of “opening” and “communicability” (Agamben 2000:91). ‘What face exposes and reveals is not something that could be formulated as a signifying proposition of sorts, nor is it a secret doomed to remain forever incommunicable” (Agamben 2000:91). It is clear that for him the face is not a revelation of “truth” about the state of being and the world, but as he puts it “is only opening, only communicability” (Agamben 2000: 91). Agamben's’ concept of a face, as a place of

opening and communicability, is parallel to the perspective I have developed. From Agamben's perspective, my photographs (portraits of political prisoners) are a way to think about restoring language, hence face, to people (political prisoners) who have been muted or 'defaced'. The Czechoslovak Communist state aimed to silence Mukls as well as to make them socially invisible.

Valentine Daniel, in writing on violence in Sri Lanka, told the story of a woman he had interviewed in a refugee camp. She lost her son in an army raid five years earlier. She also lost all photographs of the son when a helicopter gunship dropped a gasoline bomb on her house. In her narratives she said that though she remembers a lot from his life, she cannot recall his face.

The face of her son was lost in her memory. Daniel wrote: "This did not prevent her from seeing her son in the face of every young man who came to the camp". He wrote: "the traces of her son's face appeared and disappeared in all of them" (Daniel 1997:337). This narrative brings to our attention the way memory and vision are interconnected within the process of a mother's coping with the loss of her son to violent events. In this case remembering the face is an effort to remake a lost image. We can see how powerful a role face can take on in the context of violence.

Photographer Sebastio Salgado wrote that when he documented refugees from around the world, the misplaced, people affected by wars, genocides, and natural disasters, children always appeared around him and then followed him. Finally he said: " I am going to sit here. If you want me to take a picture of you, line up and I'll take a picture of you" (Salgado 2000:7). Salgado took portraits of children and wrote:

> "Children who had been laughing and shouting only seconds earlier were suddenly serious. The noisy crowd had become individuals who through their clothes, their poses, their expressions and their eyes, were telling stories with disarming frankness and dignity. Through their candid expressions, the sadness and suffering they had known in their short lives were poignantly apparent" (Salgado 2000:8).

Salgado reveals how making the portraits of surviving children transformed them temporarily into story tellers, and how their visual language, revealed to him a richness and their individual dignity. By photographing them in a portrait mode, focusing on individual faces, Salgado didn't just single out kids made outcast by violence; he envisioned them as heroes of everydayness marked by violence.

In the introduction I expressed how relevant it had been for me, 'reading' first the faces of the people in the Prague streets when I returned to the Czech Republic, and then the Mukls' faces in Café Gany's. 'Face reading' and face recovering from the past were my point of entry for this case study. Face has been, for me, a location within which one's 'internal self' is communicated to the external world. Recovering Mukls' public visibility and unmasking the invisible actors of the state is part of the process of the Mukls' politics of reconciliation today.

As a photographer I have taken the face as a crossroads reflecting the present and the past at the same time. While my theoretical and ethnographic work is closely related to the type of social research investigating social suffering, my methodological strategies connect ethnographic and visual ways of knowing.

Today, after the fall of the Communist regime in Czech Republic, Mukls are reclaiming their lost face. Their politics are tied to an effort to reconstruct their history of suffering and to speak in the voice which was intended to be silenced and, through these strategies of reconciliation, to gain back what they lost. The family life they lost can't be reclaimed. Their relatives died, left them or over the years worked on overcoming the mutual alienation caused by separation. The struggle to communicate about one's suffering and the desire to be understood are central to the Mukls' conditions today. The Mukls face a dilemma rooted in their desire to be understood and in their struggle to find a way to tell their story. "The narratives of violence cannot be told unless we see the relation between pain and language that a culture has evolved" (Das 1997:88). This quote is particularly relevant in the context of Mukls' reconciliation.

Fiona Ross, when discussing the struggle to define truth constituted in the aftermath of violence as one of many elements located in reconciliation, and thus different from political truth experienced during the violent acts, emphasized its continuity: "The struggle for truth continues ever afterwards" (Ross 2001). Mukls' communication about their condition is marked by the injustice, that is embodied in being forced to live a 'fiction'. Their 'language of reconciliation' is the property of an individual as well as the

shared property of the Mukls' community. The individual forms of reconciliation are one's everyday effort to bear the tensions among coming to terms with traumatic experience located in the past, negotiating the immediate present and constructing future possibilities. One's everyday condition combines recovery from 'facing death' and the ability to maintain hope. Mukls' reconciliation is their daily coping with last night's dreams and tomorrow's possibilities.

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