

COMMUNAL AUTONOMY AS A BASE OF CIVIL SOCIETY: LOCAL AUTONOMY AND THE BUILDING OF NATIONAL CULTURE IN BOHEMIA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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1. "THE FOUNDATION OF A FREE STATE IS A FREE COMMUNE"

"The foundation of a free state is a free commune."¹ This is the credo of the Provisional communal law newly introduced after Revolution of 1848-49, as one of the few achievements of the "Revolution of Intellectuals." After the patrimonial administrative and juridical system was abolished along with servitude in March 1849, local communes, which had been subordinated to patrimonial rule together with city municipal offices, were transformed into self-governing bodies to exercise administrative power in local society in the place of patrimonial offices. Municipalities and country communes (*Stadtgemeinde, Landgemeinde*) were expected to manage communal property according to the law as an independent corporation. Economic and social affairs inside a commune were regarded as matters of its "natural" competence into which no state administration should intervene.²

1 We can find this sentence in the first chapter of Provisional Communal Law of 1849, and it appeared repeatedly in liberal newspapers and journals in the second half of the 19th century.

2 For the Austrian and Bohemian communal constitution, see: Jiří Klabouch, *Die Gemeindeselbstverwaltung in Österreich 1848-1918* (München/Wien, 1989); Idem, "Die Lokalverwaltung in Cisleithanien," in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, Bd. II., Verwaltung und Rechtswesen* (Wien, 1975); Jan Janák, "Územní samospráva," in: J. Janák a Zd. Hledíková, *Dějiny správy v českých zemích do roku 1945* (Praha, 1989); František Roubík, *Vývoj správního rozdělení Čech v letech 1850-1868. Sborník archivu ministerstva vnitra*, sv. XII (Praha, 1939).

This communal law (*Provisorisches Gemeindegesetz*) also presumed the existence of self-governing bodies at higher levels; i.e., district, regional and provincial (*Bezirks-, Kreis-, Landes-selbstverwaltung*).³ In 1850, the district office (*Bezirkshauptmannschaft*) was introduced as the lowest instance of the state apparatus. Higher-level self-governing bodies were to control the state administration on each level. So the key concept of the communal law was the dual system of administration (*Doppelgleisigkeit*); that is, self-governmental bodies counterbalancing the state administration.

The initiator of the communal law, the interior minister Count Franz Stadion, after whom it is often referred to as Stadion's communal law, served in the imperial bureaucracy in the 1840s as the governor of Küstenland, and later, after the great peasant uprising of 1846, as the governor of Galicia.⁴ During this period he undertook a series of experimental reforms, while the authority and power of the Estates in these provinces became more and more weakened. He attempted reforms of the communal system after the English county model as a means of re-establishing patrimonial authority. When he was nominated Minister of the Interior in the cabinet of Prince Felix Schwarzenberg in November 1848 after the Vienna October uprising, one of his essential concerns was to realise his former experiments across the whole Empire under a completely new set of conditions. Now that the aristocratic landlords had lost the legal base from which to exercise social influence on the local society, they were anxious about both the intervention by the state administration into their domains and the uncontrolled opposition from the local population. Their anxiety was not without reason: imperial authorities had been eager to intervene directly into peasant-landlord relations from the time of enlightened absolut-

3 Kaiserliches Patent vom 17. März 1848, Provisorisches Gemeindegesetz, *RGB*, Nr. 170/1849.

4 For Franz Stadion and the aristocratic concept of self-government around 1848-49, see: Ralph Melville, *Adel und Revolution in Böhmen. Strukturwandel von Herrschaft und Gesellschaft in Österreich um die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz, 1998).

ism, while, on the other hand, they had recently witnessed ominous social unrest in rural areas during the revolution of 1848.

Although it is true that the Provisional communal law of 1849 was a product of the political efforts of the conservative aristocracy supported by such as Stadion, Count Leo Thun-Hohenstein, and later Count Heinrich Clam-Martinitz, the undoubtedly liberal core of the communal autonomy was to become the most important pillar of the political activities for liberals in the 1860s and its aftermath, especially for Czech national liberals. These conservative roots of communal autonomy would always cause deep disputes among political camps each time communal law became the order of the day in the second half of the 19th century.

Communal law, which had remained unrealised on the large scale, was formally suspended under the so-called Sylvester Patent on December 31, 1851. The higher self-governmental bodies never came into being and local communes, whose executive bodies had been elected according to the electoral law attached to the communal law, fell under the strict control of district offices.

A more serious problem inherent in the communal autonomy was the total indifference and disregard of the local population to public affairs. Communal property was dealt with according to local customs, and communal affairs were directed by a handful of families whose members alternated as village justice of peace (*Richter*, or *Friedensrichter*, *rychtář*) under feudal rule. They often made use of communal property, distributing profits from it among themselves as if it had been their own property in a sense of the modern Austrian civil code and communal law. District offices and gendarmeries repeatedly reported cases of “arbitrary” management of communal property in contravention to the legal regulations, the failings of local police, and so on. Communal self-government did not function as well in keeping “peace and order” (*Ruhe und Ordnung*) in local societies as the state administration had expected it to. Most of the population were not interested in the elections for the communal committee and were often even suspicious of them. When the second elections to the communal committees due to be held

in 1854, three years after the initial elections, were suspended by the Sylvester Patent, it reflected more the reality of the local societies than the intention of Neo-absolutism to liquidate communal autonomy.

Czech liberals were not very interested in building communal self-government in the early stages during and after the revolution of 1848.⁵ As they were more concerned with establishing provincial autonomy (autonomy of the Kingdom of Bohemia, or of the lands of Saint Wenceslaw's crown) as a base for a Czech national program, most of them were discontent with the draft constitution submitted to the Constitutional assembly by Kajetan Maier in March 1849, which proposed regional and district self-government, but denounced provincial autonomy. In the latter half of the 1850s, there appeared, however, some protagonists among the Czech liberals who eagerly called for communal autonomy as a basis for a civil society, as "a school of civil ethics." Stanislav Kodym, editor of *Hospodářské noviny* (Farming newspaper), a newspaper for peasants, and František Šimáček, editor of *Posel z Prahy* (Messenger from Prague), a journal for peasants and artisans, both sought the amelioration of agricultural production, association activities (such as loan institutions, peasant or craftsman corporations, but also reading clubs, etc.) and civil education.⁶ For them, the commune was not to be a closed community ruled by traditional habits, but a public institution by itself, which was to be developed toward a larger unit of civil society – national society. They acutely criticized the existing practices of local communities, and their ar-

5 Karel Havlíček was an exception in this sense. In his article, "What is a Commune?" (Co jest obec?), he emphasised the importance of communal life "as a school of civic education." The commune was, for him, "a base of the nation." Karel Havlíček, "Co jest obec?," in: *Karla Havlíčka Borovského Politické spisy. Díl I., Pražské noviny (1846-1848)* (Praha, 1900).

6 Šimáček's *Posel z Prahy* was regarded as "Ultra-čechisch" by the imperial authorities, and was often confiscated because of a suspicion that it would stimulate popular unrest among the peasant population. Cf., František Kutnar, "Sociální neklid zemědělského obyvatelstva v Čechách za Bachova absolutismu," in: *Sborník Historický* 17 (1970).

guments corresponded to those of the state authority reports mentioned above, but from the opposing point of view. According to their views, the absence of “civil ethics” was a consequence of the continuing feudal mentality. Citizens, conscious of their rights and responsibilities, should have been created from feudal subjects after the abolition of servitude. For these protagonists, the modernization of agrarian society was closely related to the development of civil society.

2. THE PRACTICES OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

After the fall of Neo-absolutism and the onset of pseudo-constitutional era in 1861, the reform of communal autonomy soon became one of the main political issues of the day. A new law, which was drafted under the great influence of conservative aristocrats headed by H. Clam-Martinitz, was enacted in 1859 but, in effect, remained unrealised. In 1862, the Reichsrat approved general legislation for communal and district autonomy for Cisleithania, and the Bohemian Diet started debate on a communal order for the Kingdom of Bohemia in February of the following year.

The most crucial problem in the debate in the Bohemian Diet was whether aristocratic estates were to be excluded from communal relations. Former landlords were unwilling to allow self-governmental bodies to intervene in the affairs of their domains. By keeping their estates whole, they would be able to maintain their political power and social influence in local society as independent agents. Liberals, both Czechs and Germans, opposed the exclusion of estates, arguing that the commune was not a mere village as before 1848, but a basic unit of civil society. For them, exclusion of estates meant the revival, in part, of the feudal order with its aristocratic privileges. Aristocratic concepts of communal autonomy were founded upon the conviction that aristocratic landlords were not bound by the same civil order that was applied to their former serfs. Who in the world could have believed that the lord would sit on a communal committee together with his former subjects as colleagues! However, Clam-Martinitz, Thun-Hohenstein and others could

not carry their points and the new Communal order for the Kingdom of Bohemia was finally approved in 1863. It was a very unusual moment in the history of the Bohemian Diet, when Czech and German liberals voted along the same lines. With this new Communal order, the district corporation (*Bezirksvertretung*) came into being as a higher self-governmental body whose main task was to supervise the communal self-government in practice (elections into communal committee, administration of communal property and so on).⁷ Even though there yet remained some room for the aristocrats to influence local politics on a district level, the self-governmental bodies became the bastion of liberal politics after 1863.⁸

For the Czech liberals in Bohemia, who did not always have a solid institutional background even in the Bohemian Diet in the 1860s and 1870s, the credo, “the foundation of a free state is a free commune” was much more essential than for the Bohemian Germans who could find a strong ally in the Viennese German liberals. Czech liberals had dominated the Prague municipal council since 1861, and Prague meant much more than mere symbolical centeredness as “the mother of Czech towns” (*matička českých měst*). More fundamental than that was that they were creating a “Czech” public opinion from below by trans-

7 The district corporation was composed of representatives elected from three or four electoral bodies; i.e., representatives of the large landowners, large enterprises (only in districts with industrial and commercial centers), the city and townships (*Stadtgemeinde*), and the communes in rural areas (*Landgemeinde*). The boundary of the autonomous district corresponded with that of the political district within the state administration, later the juridical district. The actual competence of the district corporation was very limited: beside the supervision over communal self-government, only the administration of roads, railways, bridges, etc. could be mentioned as being of any significance. It was more the symbolic property of liberals than a real political vehicle.

8 Josef Redlich emphasised the liberal character of the Austrian communal constitution in comparison to that of Prussia. Even if his high estimation of the Austrian communal constitution is somewhat exaggerated, it well reflects the political expectations of Austrian liberals for local autonomy. Cf. Josef Redlich, *Das Wesen der österreichischen Kommunal-Verfassung* (Leipzig, 1910).

forming local communities into a civil society; namely, a Czech nation, as a full political subjectivity, that could be clearly distinguished from a certain population defined solely by linguistic and folkloristic character. They were always confronted with the account, “*das gemachte Čechentum*” (the invented Czechness), by which German liberals alleged the artificiality of the national demands of Czech liberals. The more plebeian Young Czechs who had gradually crystallised around *Národní listy* (*The National newspaper*) and *Hlas* (*The Voice*), particularly after the great Polish uprising of 1863, were ready to build up an organisational network of local honourables through self-governmental bodies, while the Old Czechs managed to get political support from the federalist wing of conservative aristocrats in the Bohemian Diet.

In reality, however, the practices of the local communities had changed little since the 1850s, even after the introduction of the new Communal order. The first elections under the new communal electoral law did not seem much different from those that had been held in the rural areas in the 1850s. Despite the liberal conviction that communal autonomy was the fundamental base of the national society, the local populace often accepted the ideal of well-institutionalised communal self-government with indifference, scepticism or even with disgust: villages and townships in which popular autonomy was practiced certainly existed, but civil autonomy in a liberalist sense simply did not. According to the Czech Liberals, district corporations, as a higher self-governmental body, were expected to develop civil ethics among the local communes. District corporations were to express “Czech public opinion” in regions with a Czech-speaking population. They played an important role, not only in “demonstrating the public opinion of the Czech nation,” but also in the cultural transformation within the local society.

3. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NATIONAL CULTURE

Civil society was not conceptualised in history as a set of abstract social relations without any border. In the Habsburg Monarchy, several civil societies were born in the second half

of the 19th Century, each with a boundary represented by a national culture and a public sphere mediated by each national language, which we would call national societies. According to the 19th-century liberals in East Central Europe, the nation as a political subject needed civilising potential; it was regarded as a vehicle of modern civilisation. Even though some linguistic, ethnic (folkloristic) or religious uniqueness was certainly included in the nationalist discourse, it might not suffice to build a nation. Folkloristic uniqueness by itself might even contradict the ideal of nationhood. Though Czech “patriots” (*vlastenci*) in the time of National Renaissance (*národní obrození*) sought the deep roots of the democratic character of Czech society in popular culture, and the idyllic image of Czech peasants’ life was very important in patriotic discourse, this fact reflected much more their effort to create semiotic forms for a cultural representation of the Czech nation than their interest in real popular culture.⁹

The liberal concept of nationhood presupposed a certain hierarchy of cultures, as evaluated mainly by the potentiality of the national language as a medium of social communication in the public sphere. For the German liberals, a Czech or Slovene nation simply did not exist because of the lack of any Slavic literary legacy in the Habsburg Empire. Czech or Slovene languages could have contributed to the rich diversity of German national culture, but these languages would be spoken only in private life, never in the public sphere! Thus, while Czech “patriots” endeavoured to elaborate the standardised modern Czech language, not only with its literal norms, but with semiotic forms of representation of national culture in literature in the pre-March period, after the Revolution of 1848-49, and especially after the 1860s, the problem was to transform literary norms into social

9 See: Jirí Rak, *Bývali Čechové. České historické mýty a stereotypy* (Praha, 1994) (especially 5. chapter, “Ty naše chaloupky české”); *Idyla a idyličnost v kultuře 19. století*, Archiv města Plzně, 1999.

and political practices in the second phase of the national development.¹⁰

The socialisation of literary representation coincided with the project of civil society for the Czech Liberals. Civic ethics were expressed in national terms. Through the confrontation with German national society, which provided idioms of national expression and criteria for comparison, Czech national society was created with its own national forms of verbal and artistic expression, norms of social relations, ethics and norms of behaviour in everyday life.¹¹ It was defined externally in relation to other civilised European nations (particularly with the German nation) and to the neighbouring Slavic nations. The civilised character of national society was contrasted to the feudal orders of the past (“two hundred years of national slumber”). There supposedly existed a “not-yet-civilised” populace ready to be awakened to Czech or Slavic consciousness (representation of Slovaks played a specific role in this context). Thus, the borders of the national society were drawn in two ways: in terms of other nations, and of “uncivilised others,” a term often used to refer to the Jews.

10 This division into stages corresponds to the thesis of Miroslav Hroch concerning the three phases in development of a nation. However, he concentrates his analysis on phase B, and his explanation of the transition from phase B to phase C (from cultural movement to massive political movement) is not so persuasive because he implicitly describes this transition as a lineal process of acceptance of “patriotic” ideology by the wider spectrum of the population. Hroch does not present any definite contradiction between the cultural and political programs of national movements, and their acceptance in popular culture. From this point of view, his thesis supposes evolutionary continuity from “Czech-speaking ethnicity” to the formation of a national society. See: Miroslav Hroch, *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas* (Praha, 1968); Idem, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge U.P., 1985); Idem, *V národním zájmu* (Praha, 1999); Idem, *Na prahu národní existence* (Praha, 1999).

11 Bedřich Smetana was more influenced by the Wagnerian school than by the folk tradition in Bohemia in creating his “national” style. In fact, he was not interested in popular culture. Jaroslav Strítěcký, “Tradice a obrození. Bedřich Smetana,” in: *Povědomí tradice v novodobé české kultuře* (Doba Bedřicha Smetany) (Praha, 1988).

4. THE REPRESENTATION OF NATION – AN ERA OF FESTIVITY MANIA IN BOHEMIA

By looking into national festivities, we can analyse concretely the function local self-governmental bodies had in the socialisation of national forms. Local self-governmental bodies and voluntary associations were the main pillars in the building of a national society in Bohemia. Through the organisation of and participation in national festivities, the local population could redefine their own place in national society. The local population did not remain passive in this process: they were not merely the target of propaganda by “patriots.” They had their own cultural strategy in the transformation of local society, thus they reacted very actively to make use of national discourse in local contexts.

Since the beginning of the pseudo-constitutional era, especially from 1862 until about the turn of the 19th century, Bohemia experienced an era of festivity mania.

“What festivities all over our motherland! Festivities follow one after another. People are never short of reasons for celebration. If anyone should want to participate in all of these patriotic excursions, meetings and festivities, then he would have to be almost constantly travelling, and this is literally true of the main initiators and organisers... If we were to enumerate all the festivities that have taken place or are proposed in this year, we would bore our readers. The devotion of untiring organisers is so huge that it is already decided when and in which town who will celebrate whom in the next year... But despite such a desire for festivities, most of the participants often do not have any detailed knowledge about the contribution of the celebrated.”¹²

Such accounts of national festivities were heard not only from newspapers critical of the Czech national movements. Matěj Brouček, a famous figure in Svatopluk Čech’s novels, also commented on this situation:

“There are so many great persons in Bohemia that we must dedicate almost all our time to sincere applause, various commemorations, banquets and other such valuable occasions...”

12 “Radovánky v Čechách,” *Pražské noviny* (October 2, 1862).

The peak of the festivity mania came in 1868, just after the Compromise was approved and liberal constitutions were introduced in Cisleithania in December 1867. The Viennese liberal newspaper, *Die Presse*, wrote about the national festivities in Bohemia as follows:

“National journalism indulges itself in sweet cheers and spends all its energy with its characteristic toughness to spread the seeds of enthusiasm among the people. The poor people, who have been ready to follow their leaders until now, will never have rest. When one day is a great festival day, they will read exaggeratedly exciting descriptions of it the following day, which suggests what the nation should do and really does for the next festival... On May 22, the opening ceremony of the new bridge; on the 30th, the anniversary of the National museum; at the beginning of June, the festival for Palacký’s birthday; at the end of June, a Czech gymnastic festival, and so on indefinitely. When you think that corporations, guilds, students, workers, in short all the participants in festivals are demanded to take part in the preparations long before the ‘national holidays,’ you will admit that it is more harmful than profitable.”¹³

This was written on the eve of the Festival of the Foundation Stone of the Czech (Bohemian) National Theatre, which was undoubtedly the biggest festival in the “era of festivity mania.” It interests us not because of the extraordinary importance assigned to it in Czech national history, but because it can be regarded as the synthesis of organisational methods and cultural strategies articulated in Czech national politics from the pre-March period, especially from the 1860s, and equally as an archetype of similar subsequent movements. This festival was not a mere political manifestation, nor the expression of “cultural nationalism.” The concept of a Czech National theatre originated in the 1840s, but it was only in the 1860s, when Young Czechs carried through the concept of “a great National theatre,” that the National theatre movement was realised.¹⁴ The

13 “Prag, 12. Mai. Unsere Festwoche,” *Die Presse* (May 14, 1868).

14 The Movement for a National theatre became one of the most significant “legends” in Czech national history. Traditionally the slogan, “*Národ sobě*” [Nation for itself] demonstrated the “unity of the whole Czech

“great National theatre” as “a cathedral of all arts” was supposed to represent the full membership of the Czech nation among European nations. If one thinks that even after its opening in 1883, a year after Prague university was divided into independent German and Czech universities, the National theatre suffered from a shortage of domestic repertoires and lack of audience interest, it is obvious that it was more a symbol of national culture than a working theatre at that time. When the Young Czechs were striving to realise the concept in the Committee for the construction of the National theatre, an important background to their activity (from collecting funds for the construction of the National theatre up to the Festival of the Foundation stone) was the social network of local honourables that enabled the mass mobilisation of corporations, communal and district self-governmental bodies.

National festivities began to be organised from 1862, even though similar activities had existed on a much smaller scale among a narrow circle of “patriots” previously, such as national balls, forums (*beseda*) and excursions. In the early phase of the development of national festivities we can distinguish some specific types:

1. Festivities of associations: Many voluntary associations, which would play a decisive role in national society in the following era, were established in the 1860s. Choral societies, such as *Hlahol*, *Lukeš*, and so on, and gymnastic associations *Sokol* were of especial importance. As we will see, contemporaries regarded the choral festivals in 1862 and 1864 as “festivals of the entire nation.”
2. Ordination of banners of associations or corporations (former guilds).
3. Festivals dedicated to patriotic writers (Kajetán Tyl, Václav Hanka, Vojtěch Nejedlý, Karel Havlíček, Jan Amos Komenský, etc.).
4. Excursions to historic memorials, such as Říp, Bílá Hora, Karlštejn, and so on, which had already been the destination for pilgrimages in the Baroque period, and whose religious meanings were gradually lost, or battle fields of the

Hussite revolution. Excursions were often combined with other sorts of festivals or banquets.

5. Festivals, which had initially had a religious or dynastical character, but were transformed into national activities in given social or political contexts. The festival of the October diploma is a typical example.
6. Festivals of the foundation stones of buildings to which “national” significance was assigned.

This typology is not strictly exclusive, and several elements can be observed in a single festival.

Festival committees, which were responsible for the preparations, consisted of local honourables, in the most case, of civil origin. They were usually also members of communal or district committees, and municipal councils or district corporations had de facto responsibility for the organisation. Though associations also played a very significant role, self-governmental bodies were the main initiators and organisers of festivals in the 1860s. When in 1865 the Committee for the construction of the National theatre called for a collection, it charged the chairmen of the communal self-governmental bodies with the duty of organising collection activities in the rural areas.¹⁵ When communal self-governmental bodies showed little reaction to these

nation” in the National theatre project. Even in 1933, when Jan Bartoš pointed out deep discord between F.L. Rieger and “the younger generation of national politics and arts,” and highly estimated the role of the Young Czechs in realising the theatre, it evoked scandalous polemics. See, Jan Bartoš, “Národní divadlo a jeho budovatelé,” *Dějiny Národního divadla I* (Praha, 1933) (A book review on this volume by Karel Stloukal, in: *Český časopis historický* 40 (1934), sešit 2, pp. 406-412); Bartoš reacted to Stloukal by a brochure, *Legenda o budování Národního divadla a její obhájce* (Praha, 1935). Although Bartoš’s thesis about the Young Czechs is exaggerated, it is true that what allowed the Young Czechs to take the initiative in the National theatre movement was an organisational background supported by local honourables through self-governmental activities.

- 15 “Na zdar důstojného divadla národního! Rodáci!,” *Národní listy* (July 25, 1865).

directives, district corporations took the initiative.¹⁶ Leaders of the self-governmental bodies, especially those of district corporations, had well-developed connections with the centre of national politics, with deputies of the Bohemian Diet, and above all with the Young Czech wing.

5. CULTURAL FORMS APPROPRIATED – CREATION OF NEW SEMIOTICS

As far as representations of national culture are concerned, organisers appropriated forms from church ceremonies, folkloristic festivities and customs from the Estate society of the Baroque period. Excursions to historical places were a direct imitation of Baroque pilgrimages and even their destinations were the same: only the signs adopted produced other meanings in the different context of national terms. A national festival on the hill of Říp was held annually from 1862, and a mass “meeting” took place there in May 1868 on the occasion of the ceremonial departure of the foundation stone for the National theatre. It became one of the biggest political demonstrations of the period, with more than 20, 000 participants gathering there from the surrounding areas. This “national pilgrimage” to Říp originated from the Festival of St. George from the Baroque era. Indeed, it was more a religious than a national festivity for many of the participants even in the 1860s. When local honourables, often with the mayor of a local city or president of the district corporation at their head, ceremonially received guests from Prague, they appropriated the forms of dynastical traditions, just as if they were welcoming secular or clerical notables. This

16 A list of district corporations and communes that contributed to the collection was regularly published on the front page of *Národní listy*. See articles: “Náš venkov a velké národní divadlo,” *Národní listy* (October 12, 1865); “Okresní zastupitelstva a národní divadlo,” *Národní listy* (November 5, 1865), etc. It is remarkable that collection for the National theatre went on at the same time as an electoral campaign for the district committee. These articles emphasised the significance of civil autonomy for the further development of national culture. Local politics then appeared in Czech liberal newspapers in the context of national welfare.

form was also applied to the procession of the foundation stones for the National theatre from various “legendary” regions to Prague. National festivities could appeal to the unengaged local populace through application of well-known cultural forms. Again, a typical example was the Festival of the Foundation Stone for the National theatre. It was held on May 16, traditionally known as the day of Saint John of Nepomuk, whose cult spread well beyond Bohemia during the Baroque period and survived deep into the 19th Century. St. John of Nepomuk was venerated as a patron saint of Bohemia and was a symbol of patriotism for the Kingdom of Bohemia (*Landespatriotismus*). On May 16, more than 20, 000 pilgrims from all over the Kingdom of Bohemian used to visit St. Nepomuk’s statue on the stone bridge and Prague cathedral in what was the biggest pilgrimage at that time. The Festival of the Foundation stone appropriated the scenery and dramaturgy of the Nepomuk festival to express the historical continuity of the Czech nation. Already in 1862, when the first choral festival was held in Prague on May 16, a newspaper article in *Národní listy* called for the need of a national festival similar to that of the “ancient Greeks.”¹⁷ It was the first attempt to transform this religious pilgrimage into a national festival, later completed by the total denial of the legend of Saint Nepomuk together with its Baroque religiousness in a new concept of secular national history.¹⁸ The main motive expressed in the national festivals was the construction of norms

17 “It is not so easy to find other occasions when our people could gather from all the corners of our motherland in such a great number. By tradition, this day is chosen and blessed. It depends on us to use this occasion for the benefit of our nation... Our people are accustomed to come to Prague together en masse, because Prague is our sincere delight. ‘Whoever can come on this day, come!’ It is not without reason that our people look at golden Prague as their spiritual mother. Because the great work of national Renaissance began here, the Resurrection of this almost dying, pushed down to the grave...” *Národní listy* (May 16, 1862).

18 See: Jakub Arbes, *Lež a pravda o “svatém” Janu Nepomuckém* (Praha, 1869). On the development of Nepomucký legend, see: Vít Vlnas, *Jan Nepomucký. Česká legenda* (Praha, 1993).

of civil society. This motive was represented in contrast with the older “uncivilised” character of folkloristic tradition. Thus, folk fairs of journeymen and other elements of the lower class populace of Prague, such as *Fidlovačka* or *Slavník*, were never considered for transformation into national festivals, even though the words “national festival” (*národní slavnost*) had been sometimes used to mean such folk fairs. In the Foundation stone festival, the folk fair belonging to Nepomuk festival was only marginalized.

The national concept of the festival might have remained behind the meaning rendered by traditional forms for many visitors and even active participants. There was extensive space for various interpretations of the festivals. Thus, there often appeared substantial contradictions among the themes expressed in the festival. But the key problem is not so much the meaning as the form of the expression; it concerns creation of a mode of representation, not the spreading of any national ideas or ideology, needless to say, not the “awakening” of the national consciousness.

6. SOCIAL RELATIONS RE-DEFINED – CIVIL ETHICS AND NATIONAL IDIOMS

In national festivities, various social groups re-defined their position in the national society. Under the Habsburg monarchy, privileges granted to the guilds were formally abolished in 1859 by the new Trade law. Nevertheless the former guilds continued to exist as craft corporations for the control of production, mutual help among members, and some corporations even had symbolic authority in urban society. These corporations were gradually converted into voluntary craft associations, which Liberals actively promoted. On the eve of the Foundation stone festival, many craft associations renewed their old banners or guild symbols and held ceremonies to consecrate them; a typical preparatory activity for their participation in the national festival. For example, the Millers’ association from the Old Town of Prague (*Staré město pražské*) renovated their guild banner “from 1564,” which had not been shown in public since the cor-

onation of Ferdinand V in 1836.¹⁹ The millers decided to participate in the Foundation stone festival with this banner and in “black *čamara* with the emblem of the Millers’ guild.” They would proceed with “a red and white carriage drawn by four white horses” on which the journeymen would work at both “conventional and American flour milling.” We can observe in the procession of the craft associations in the national festival a strong mixture of national (Slavic) idioms, motives of modern technological progress and signs of guild tradition, often characterised by strong dynastic loyalty. The applied motives were often incoherent and could even contradict each other, but that did not matter. What was important was the process by which the traditional signs of the guilds were transplanted into the historicism of the national society so that they could be reinterpreted in a national context. These reinterpreted signs represented a social re-definition of the associations in national society.

While craft associations could refer to the abundant signs that had been accumulated to represent their historical traditions and privileges since the ancient regime, the peasantry did not have such signs at their disposal to represent themselves as an independent component of the Czech nation. Although in the

19 *Národní listy* (May 17, 1868). The first workers’ association “Oul” was established just before the Foundation Stone Festival. This association sent a petition to the Committee for the construction of the National theatre demanding that the chairman of the association also bless the foundation stone in name of the Slavic workers in the Kingdom of Bohemia, and that members of the association should be allowed to participate in the procession with the emblem of Oul. Archiv sboru pro postavení Národního divadla (Divadelní oddělení Národního muzea), A XIX 1868 I. From an appeal of Oul, its intention is evident: “The most glorious day of Czech nation will come soon, the day, when our desire will be realized, dignified monument of our nation, the great national theatre will be built. The whole nation is preparing for the day of celebration in a solemn and glorious way. In all classes of the Czech population activity continues so as to prove to the world that Czechs are alive, and they recognize the great significance of the day, when the foundation will be laid for the cathedral of Czech Thalia,” *Dělník* 1:10 (April 15, 1868). The workers were to be promptly given a place, full membership, among the other classes of the “nation,” and their place was to be visible through a demonstrative participation in national festivities.

literature of the National renaissance, the romantic image of the peasantry was one of the most important motifs, the incorporation of the peasantry into the public sphere of national society was always problematic.

In 1836, the imperial government ordered sixteen regional offices (*Kreisämter*) in the Kingdom of Bohemia to send a young bridal couple in folk costume to participate as a “peasant delegation” in the procession celebrating the coronation of Ferdinand V held in Prague.²⁰ Allegoric carriages were also sent to the coronation, which were to show the typical industry of each region. The whole procession was intended to be a panorama of a prosperous peasantry with its unique diversity. This intention reflected the physiocratic policy of the house of Habsburgs since Maria Theresa.

The procession in the Foundation stone festival was a direct heir of this dynastic tradition. The carefully prepared course of the procession was the same as that in 1836. However, the peasantry needed to be represented in a way other than as loyal subjects. The Committee for the construction of the National theatre sent a circular to district corporations to set up a *banderium* (peasant cavalry) for the festival. District corporations in turn called upon communal committees to respond to the appeal and organised district banderia. While voluntary associations such as *Hlahol* or *Sokol* were also organised in each district, the banderium was an enterprise directed by the self-governmental body itself. The banderium expressed the local patriotism of the peasants in a framework of institutionalised autonomous bodies (*Landgemeinde, Stadtgemeinde* or *Bezirk*), which was something completely novel. This local patriotism was defined in terms of national society (it is another question that villages – *Ortsgemeinde* – constituted much more real social ties for peasant populations). The banderium was to represent the notion that the peasantry might not be dependent subjects, but an independent social class composed of free citizens. Thus the peasantry should

20 See: Hannah Laudová, “Lidové slavnosti – jejich formy a funkce v jednotlivých obdobích národního obrození,” *Etnografie národního obrození* 4 (Praha, 1978).

be a full member of the Czech nation. According to the contemporary norms of civil society, the banderium was made up only of male members of the peasantry as “independent citizens.”

What the banderium was to represent was eloquently described in a speech by Sir Andrzejewski, chairman of the district corporation of Unhošt, at the ordination of the banner of the newly established Unhošt district banderium on June 23, 1868:

“Today is a great fete day for the peasantry of our district. After a long period full of cruel and unhappy experiences, but also full of hopes and desires at the bottom of the heart, after centuries of long continued deep sleep, the peasant class has at last awoken.

The peasant class in Bohemia, is the class which has nourished the nation, but was nurtured in subjection and serfdom for centuries, which least recognised and understood their own importance and dignity as citizens and farmers, and which was least regarded and respected. The word peasant, itself, was very often pronounced with a jeer and outrage. A simple countryman was considered the last among the population of this kingdom. But now the time for emancipation comes. Getting rid of servitude, such a countryman is elevated to a citizen, the equal of all others. He now has also a duty, a duty to encourage himself toward moral and spiritual improvement, a duty to realise his position in society and his own dignity as a free citizen, a duty to cultivate his education to the same level as the other classes... The whole Czech nation was aroused to participate in the National festival of the foundation stone of the great Czech theatre. Czech peasants, grouped by district, contributed the most to the grandeur and glorification of that day. Citizens! You saw hundreds and hundreds of banners and you were convinced of its significance. Each of the banners highlighted one particular social group and each of them preached unity, and concord in unity. No one among us would not wish that our district would be proud of a similar sign of unity and accord, ... that the peasants of this district could march in unity and concord under a holy motto of progress, that they would gather around this banner and start on the road to civil enlightenment and morality, to the prosperity and salvation of our nation...”²¹

21 Svěcení praporu unhoštského banderia. Řeč pana rytíře Andrzejevského. *Národní listy* (June 23, 1867).

The banderium needed a new semiotic system to represent the peasantry as an independent class in civil society. When district corporations wanted to send a banderium to the Foundation stone festival, they had no idea of how it should look in terms of costume, behaviour, vocal expression, and so on. The Arts Society (*Umělecká beseda*) proposed a “national costume” designed by Josef Mánes and others, and this kind of costume was soon produced for commercial purposes.²² Motifs from Slavism and the Hussite Middle ages were more dominant than those from Bohemian folklore.

During the period of festivity, a number of banderia and local associations were established, most of which celebrated the “ordination of the banner.” More important than the establishment of the banderia themselves was the new semiotic system that was invented to be applied to the every day life in local society over the following period. According to gendarmerie reports in April 1869, the banderium of the district Karlín held a funeral procession in honour of “a peasant son, Ludiwig Hrnška,” but “no national signs, no national costume, no demonstration nor anything like that were observed.”²³ The district office of Karlín reported two other similar cases in April and May of 1869. Preparations for and participation in national festivals provided an occasion for the invention and spreading of a new semiotic system, including modes of behaviour, vocal expression and costumes, that could express new social relations in local society; i.e., express the formation of a civil society. It was at the same time a process for the nationalisation of popular culture.

22 The commercialisation of national items and icons is worth discussing. At the Festival of the Foundation stone of the National theatre, pictures of national memorials, brochures with patriotic poems, portraits of “patriots,” medals and so on were all sold. Tradesmen asked the Committee for the construction of the National theatre to permit them a monopoly to sell some souvenirs at the festival (memorial medals, lithographs of the future National theatre, its plan and so on). Some of them even proposed that they would give half of the profits they would gain from this monopoly to the Committee. It must have been a pretty good business!

23 Bezirksvorsteher Kolín an das Statthaltere-Präsidium 14.5.1868. SÚA PM1860-70, 8/6/2/87.